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# The Chronicle of a People's War

The Military and Strategic History of the  
Cambodian Civil War, 1979–1991

Boraden Nhem



# The Chronicle of a People's War

*The Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War, 1979–1991* narrates the military and strategic history of the Cambodian Civil War, especially the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), from when it deposed the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 until the political settlement in 1991. The PRK survived in the face of a fierce insurgency due to three factors: an appealing and reasonably well-implemented political program, extensive political indoctrination, and the use of a hybrid army. In this hybrid organization, the PRK relied on both its professional, conventional army, and the militia-like, “territorial army.” This latter type was lightly equipped and most soldiers were not professional. Yet the militia made up for these weaknesses with its intimate knowledge of the local terrain and its political affinity with the local people. These two advantages are keys to victory in the context of counterinsurgency warfare.

The narrative and critical analysis is driven by extensive interviews and primary source archives that have never been accessed before by any scholar, including interviews with former veterans (battalion commanders, brigade commanders, division commanders, commanders of provincial military commands, commanders of military regions, and deputy chiefs of staff), articles in the *People's Army* from 1979 to 1991, battlefield footage, battlefield video reports, newsreel, propaganda video, and official publications of the Cambodian Institute of Military History.

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**Boraden Nhém**

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# Acronyms

ANKI	Armée National du Kampuchea Indépendant (English equivalent: National Army of Independent Kampuchea)
ANS	Armée Nationale Sihanoukhiste (English equivalent: Sihanouk's National Army)
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
CGDK	Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPK	Communist Party of Kampuchea
EXCO	Executive Committee
FUNCINPEC	Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, Et Coopératif (English equivalent: National United Front for a Cambodia Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative)
ICP	Indochina Communist Party
JMC	Joint Military Command
KPNLAF	Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces
KPNLF	Khmer People's National Liberation Front
KPRA	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army
KPRP	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party
MR	Military Region
NADK	National Army of Democratic Kampuchea
NR	National Road
OMZ	Operational Military Zone
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PERMICO	Permanent Military Committee for Coordination
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
PMC	Provincial Military Command
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
SNC	Supreme National Council of Cambodia
UNAMIC	United Nations Advance Mission In Cambodia
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

# 1 Introduction

## The chronic war

### 1.1 The living chronicles of a People's War

Rainy season 2009. Under the shade of a large tree across the street from the US embassy in Phnom Penh, I was standing uneasily with a group of strangers waiting for the visa to the US that had been approved the previous day. Naturally, we did not just wait silently. We conversed, we made friends. The outcome of a conversation with a stranger has never been predictable or forthcoming. But the one I had during that hot, humid day was very enlightening.

I sheltered from the sun next to an old man dressed in an austere outfit. Exhibiting a fatalistic and taciturn appearance, the man seemed unconcerned with the world around him as if he had already experienced all aspects of life. I decided to initiate a conversation. I asked him about the purpose of his visit to the United States of America. He said he planned to visit his daughter who was already a US citizen. I said I was going to the US for my study and boasted about my dissertation topic. In fact, I had already finished a master's paper on the US military doctrine in the Vietnam War. Surely, I thought I was rightly entitled to some pride for such a knowledge on war.

But I have never been so wrong.

The old man turned to regard me with a cold smile and seemed impressed. "The Vietnamese military operations in Cambodia were a more interesting story," he rebutted. I was dazed. I immediately asked myself why I didn't study the "classic war" in Cambodia from 1979 to 1991. I then gave myself a reassuring answer "It's impossible. No one could do it, there is no source." Immediately giving up on this momentary spark of interest, I continued the conversation. "Have you served in the military, uncle?" I asked. To which he answered "Yes, but I served in the Vietnamese unit, the 330th Division."

I had no clue as to what he was talking about. What? A Cambodian serving in a Vietnamese military unit? The old man must have been confused, I thought. But I was wrong again. I would later learn that during the Vietnamese drive inside Cambodia in 1979, they recruited many refugees into their ranks and many would return to work in the Cambodian units

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with actual combat experience. It's certainly possible that a few could have chosen to stay in the division. But in 2009, I had no clue. "Was it good?" I asked. To my surprise, he did not answer in the affirmative.

The old man claimed that his unit operated in Battambang province and in one major operation, he witnessed the failed Vietnamese frontal assaults on fortified positions on high ground. The assault was repeated several times to no avail. "The division lost a lot of men," the old man said. I could see that the weight of memory gave him quite an uneasy feeling.

"So you've now quit the martial arts world, right?" I asked by making reference to a popular Chinese martial arts movie series at the time, in order to help relieve some tensions in his mind.

"Yes. I'm retired, but I still receive pensions from the division," the old man answered. Our conversation concluded when the embassy guard called us in to collect the approved visa.

The conversation lingered in my mind even after I bid farewell to that veteran of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) 330th Division. But there was nothing I could do. It was not like I could just call the 330th Division, asking about some undated and unnamed operation to try to test the old man's claims.

Five years later, I was sitting with a former commander of a division belonging to the Phnom Penh government, the regime that was supported by Vietnam in the 1980s. The former commander was initially a regimental commander of the Cambodian 196th Division. His unit operated in support of the Vietnamese division, which he happened to identify as the 330th Division. The former commander claimed that the Vietnamese ran out of ideas, as their assaults on the Khmer Rouge's fortified position on a large hill were repeatedly repelled. He then suggested an indirect attack involving an infiltration force behind the enemy lines. By avoiding frontal assault, the former commander was able to defeat the fortified position in the first assault and with a smaller force. The Vietnamese were impressed. The former commander was later rewarded with the command of a newly established 6th Division. I have always wondered if the former commander witnessed the very same Vietnamese assaults described by the old man I met outside the US embassy in 2009.

A new realization started to sink in. I was starting to think about the future of my writing project. As a political scientist by trade, my dissertation was quite theoretical, although I use historical accounts as evidence. After some interesting discussions with my PhD dissertation committee at the University of Delaware, as well as my master's committee at the US Army Command and General Staff College, I decided to do what I could do best: to do the things that have never been done before.

"The Vietnam War has been studied to death," one of my mentors had commented. The director of graduate studies at the US Army Command and General Staff College bluntly noted:

Unless you have discovered previously unexamined archives from the Central Committee or the Imperial General Staff, it's unlikely that your work is going to be original. This is especially true if you study World War I, World War II, or the Vietnam War.

Any research in these topics now tends to be residual.

Consequently, I have decided to construct a historical narrative of the Cambodian civil war from 1979 to 1991. I was repeatedly advised and encouraged that being a Cambodian scholar, I have an undeniable advantage: I could understand the culture, speak the language, and would find it easy to find the primary sources. But there is indeed a very difficult challenge in trying to chronicle the war from 1979 to 1991. A combination of lack of care and political upheavals contributed to the destruction and deterioration of most of the written archives. A large part of any research would necessitate tracking down the “living chronicles of war,” i.e. the veterans of all four factions in the war. To say that this is difficult is a gross understatement.

Sometimes, what one needs is pure luck.

Luck for me materialized in the form of one of the major military figures in the war, the late General (retired) Dien Del, who was a high-ranking military commander of one of the four factions, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). But he had already retired by the time I started my research and it was almost impossible to find him. Nevertheless, as fate would have it, in 2011, I was invited to my neighbor's wedding and I was randomly ushered onto a table, sitting opposite to an old man who I recognized as General Dien Del. We exchanged contacts and I was able to interview him twice before he regrettably passed away in 2013. This research was not a short or easy process, nor was it frustration free.

Over a period of seven years, the laborious process of research and trying to find witnesses continued. I was very privileged to eventually meet and converse with veterans from all four factions, sometimes privately, sometimes as part of my job as Deputy Director of the Institute of Military History. From former battalion commanders to former divisional commanders, from former deputy chief of staffs to the former militias and territorial forces, everyone was eager to share their life stories and perspectives on the war. All of these oral accounts were then checked against the scant written archives that could be found to produce the narrative in this book.

## 1.2 What makes this book unique

A necessary background is that Cambodia was plunged into full-scale war in 1970 when Prime Minister Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirimatak carried out a coup d'état that deposed Prince Sihanouk who was then head of state.<sup>1</sup> Even though one can also count 1968 as the start of the war because of the armed insurrection, albeit on a small scale, in Samlaut district, Battambang province, the year 1970 was a time when everywhere in Cambodia became

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a battlefield. The war did not end until 1999, when the last remnants of the Khmer Rouge, ironically also from the district of Samlaut, integrated into the government under the framework of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s “Win-Win Policy.”

However, the destruction of war that persisted over that period, occurrence of unusually extreme events (such as the city-wide forced evacuation under the Khmer Rouge in 1975) and more importantly, a lack of care, all had destructive effects on the archives. Most of the written archives were either destroyed or left to the elements. Those left to the elements deteriorated beyond any possibility of recovery.

The twenty-nine-year-old civil war could be divided into many periods. However, to simplify matters, we can divide the war into five major periods. The first period was from 1970 to 1975. The regime born out of the 1970 coup, the Khmer Republic fought against the Khmer Rouge and until 1973, the elements of the PAVN and the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) who sought sanctuaries in Cambodia during the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> The second period was the Khmer Rouge period from 1975 to 1979, which was marked by genocide, mass killings, and a virtual destruction of the fabric of Cambodian society. Within this time frame, one could also count a third period between 1977 and 1979, which was marked by border war between Democratic Kampuchea (official name of the Khmer Rouge state) and Vietnam, which led to the Vietnamese intervention in 1979 and the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth period was between 1979 and 1991 when four factions fought against each other. Vietnam and the Soviet Union supported the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) against the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF, and Prince Sihanouk’s movement, all of which were supported by the United States, China, and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

All factions eventually agreed to a political settlement in 1991 and allowed the United Nations to organize elections to establish a government. But war continued as the Khmer Rouge boycotted the election and vowed to fight even without external support. Thus, the last period of the Cambodian civil war was from 1993 to 1999. This could be called the “Win-Win Policy” period, following the namesake of the policy of Prime Minister Hun Sen that integrated the last remnant of the Khmer Rouge into the government and ended the war.

All of these periods received careful and comprehensive examinations and studies by many scholars, most of whom are not Cambodian. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that the intellectuals in Cambodia barely survived the political and military upheavals in the twenty-nine-year-old war. The major exception was the fourth period between 1979 and 1991, which received very little attention. The main reasons why no book has ever studied this crucial period of Cambodian history have been the lack of sources and, to a certain extent, the false belief that the Vietnamese army, the PAVN,

did all the fighting for the PRK, thus rendering the study of the PRK's military exploits useless.

The current book aspires to bridge this gap in the literature by attempting to provide an authoritative narrative of the military and strategic history of the Cambodian civil war between 1979 and 1991.

To understand what this book brings to the table, one must first look at what had already existed in the literature. We could distinguish at least four themes of scholarly works that relate to the five periods of the Cambodian civil war. The works listed here are by no means exhaustive.<sup>4</sup> They act only as reference points to the new researchers in the history of Cambodia.

The first theme was genocide study and the biography of Pol Pot. This theme occupies perhaps the largest space in the literature on the Cambodian civil war. The world was shocked by the scale of the disaster and the insanity that led to the Cambodian genocide. At least one million people perished under the Khmer Rouge regime (Democratic Kampuchea) between 1975 and 1979.<sup>5</sup> A study of this sort inevitably leads scholars to ask why a country that was known to the French as *pays du sourire* (country of smiles) became hell on earth. Charles Meyer, for example, authored a book with a telling title, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer* (Behind the Khmer Smile).<sup>6</sup>

The major contributions in the search for the source of all the disasters were the books by Australian scholars Ben Kiernan and David Chandler. Both were fortunate enough to possess primary materials such as internal party documents (which probably surfaced after the Vietnamese intervention in 1979), which allowed them to trace the life story of Pol Pot, how he came to power, and the nature of his policy and ideology. Kiernan's *How Pol Pot Came to Power* and *The Pol Pot Regime* chronicled the rise of Pol Pot and his cliques as well as the history of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>7</sup> What Kiernan missed, Chandler has filled the gap in his book, *Pol Pot: Brother Number One*.<sup>8</sup> Chandler also extensively studied the Khmer Rouge's notorious prison "S-21" in his book, *Voices from S-21*.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these English books, French authors who had lived in Cambodia until 1975 also published books that shed light on the events from 1970 to 1975. Meyer's book above is one example. Another similar book was authored by François Ponchaud, *Cambodge: Année Zéro* (Cambodia: Year Zero), which recounted life under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>10</sup>

These are only some of the major books. Other books offering specialized or complementary studies of the Khmer Rouge regime include, but are not limited to: Henri Locard's *Pol Pot's Little Red Book*, Philip Short's *Anatomy of a Nightmare*, Alexander Hinton's *Why Did They Kill*, Elizabeth Becker's *When the War was Over*, and Timothy Carny's *Communist Party Power in Kampuchea*.<sup>11</sup>

The second theme could be counted as part of the first theme, although this second one focused more on the war between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam between 1977 and 1979. Two books are of importance here: Nayan Chanda's *Brother Enemy* and Stephen Morris' *Why Vietnam Invaded*

## 6 Introduction: the chronic war

*Cambodia*.<sup>12</sup> In 2013, I published a book with Praeger, documenting the military history of the Khmer Rouge, a large part of which was dedicated to the war between 1977 and 1979.<sup>13</sup> This is where the gap in the literature occurs. From 1979 to 1991, there were five books that could be said to have covered the period, none of which offered comprehensive accounts.

The first one was Marie Alexandrine Martin's *Le Mal Cambodgien* (the translated version by Mark McLeod is *A Shattered Society*), which documented some significant activities of the PRK and the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia but failed to offer a comprehensive account.<sup>14</sup> After all, only half of the book covered the period in question while the other half covered the Khmer Rouge regime. A similar book was Nicolas Régaud's *Cambodge dans la Tourmente*, which talked about major events such as the Vietnamese dry season offensive in 1985, but then again failed to elaborate.<sup>15</sup> Both of these books mentioned major events but failed to analyze the causes and consequences as well as how the events unfolded.

The third book specifically studied the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the government that was supported by Vietnam. Margaret Slocomb's *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989* was perhaps the most sophisticated book to date that tried to study the regime.<sup>16</sup> While the book was quite comprehensive and accurate, it was a book on political history and contained virtually no information about the role of the military in maintaining the survivability of this regime against a host of enemies at a time when the PRK's main sponsor, the Soviet Union, was about to collapse and the Vietnamese economy was faltering.

Two more recent books tried to bridge the gap but, in my judgement, still came out short. The first one was Kenneth Conboy's *The Cambodian Wars: Clashing Armies and CIA Covert Operations*, which documented the American involvement in Cambodia since 1970.<sup>17</sup> The second one was a recent book by Daniel Bultmann, which employed a sociological perspective to study the military organization of the resistance movements.<sup>18</sup> While both attempted to study the military, they were still incomplete. Conboy studied only one movement, the KPNLF whose officers were former Khmer Republic soldiers, former American allies in the Cambodian civil war. The limitation can most easily be seen when it is only towards the second half of the book, that Conboy begins to talk about the KPNLF's military exploits. This comes as no surprise, since a narrow description of only one movement could hardly produce lengthy chapters. Nevertheless, the accounts of the KPNLF's operations were very accurate because Conboy himself was personally involved in many activities related to the movement.

In contrast, Bultmann studied all three resistance movements, but the tool he used (i.e. sociology) actually limited what can be studied. Bultmann's work was significant and accurate in its description of how military organization was maintained in a time of war, but it did not examine two other aspects of organization theory: organization learning and joint military command. The acid test of the effectiveness of any military organization is its performance

in combat, in the event of major campaigns (say, divisional level and above). A military may be organizationally strong and cohesive under normal circumstances, but in battle, things could go ugly really fast. This was especially true in the period between 1982 and 1985 when all three resistance movements attempted to adapt their organizations to the effects of major Vietnamese offensives. Bultmann's work is limited in its examination of this "organizational learning" during major campaigns: how the organizations adapted themselves to the weight of the enemy offensive to avoid annihilation.

In addition, a special form of military organization called "joint command," which occurred when different militaries tried to pool their resources to fight a larger enemy, was also not examined. Joint command is usually what many commanders dread because it is an incredibly difficult thing to do. Nonetheless, in some circumstances, joint command is the only viable solution for winning the war or winning it at an affordable cost. Accordingly, this current book will argue that one shortcoming of the resistance movements in Cambodia is precisely the failure to organize an effective joint command.

Joint command is not a mere agreement at the top. After the KPNLF agreed to a formal joint command with the army of Prince Sihanouk, the effects of the agreement did not actually trickle down to the soldiers who struggled to cope with the new organization during the time of intense operations between 1989 and 1991. In summary, while Bultmann did study the military organization of the three resistance movements, he did not examine the evolution of those organizations or how they adapted to the harsh realities of joint command.

Above all, the literature on the war in Cambodia from 1979 to 1991 lacked a study of the Khmer Rouge's military exploits, the clever political-military manoeuvre of Prince Sihanouk, and the relentless defense of the Phnom Penh government against the onslaught of the resistance movements. These are parts of the stories that this current book will tell.

The fourth theme of research related to the war in Cambodia covered the negotiation process between 1987 and 1991, the United Nations mission, and the humanitarian aspects of the war. Most of these books are in French. After all, Prince Sihanouk was a fluent French speaker and often issued statements or gave interviews in French, thus giving the French scholars a clear advantage. Some useful books in this theme include: Nicolas Régaud's *Cambodge dans la Tourmente*, Richard Sola's *Le Cambodge de Sihanouk*, David Roberts' *Political Transition in Cambodia 1991–1999*, Raoul M. Jennar's *Cambodian Chronicles, 1989–1996*, and Evan Gottesman's *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge*.<sup>19</sup> While most of these books documented almost in minute detail the chain of political negotiations between 1987 and 1991 leading to the Paris Peace Agreements on 23 October 1991, there was virtually no mention of how realities on the battlefield affected the negotiations. As a result, our understanding of the period can not be provided by the current literature.

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In one illuminating example, as the resistance movements became increasingly accommodating in the negotiations in late 1990, the authors were puzzled, and rushed to find answers. After all, the Phnom Penh government was isolated and not many analysts would give it a fighting chance (resulting from the assumption that this regime was merely Vietnam's "puppet regime") while the resistance movements were running rampant on the battlefield. So there was no reason why the latter should be so accommodating to the demands of the Phnom Penh government. Richard Sola seemed to have found the answer. He related an anecdote that while in Beijing, Prince Sihanouk had consulted a famous Indian fortune teller who was visiting China at the time.<sup>20</sup> The fortune teller gave an ominous prediction: Prince Sihanouk would not live past the next five years. To Sola, this was perhaps the reason why Prince Sihanouk was willing to do anything and to accept anything, as long as he could return to his homeland in the little time that remained.<sup>21</sup>

This was an interesting story. As a young student, I was so amazed with this account and could recount all the details of that story. Other authors also offered similar stories and anecdotes that tried to explain the accommodating behavior of the leaders of the resistance movements.

In this current book, however, I offer instead a military explanation of such behavior. By the late 1990s, the resistance movements lost most of their conquered territories, most of their forces were heavily depleted, and in January 1991, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (the Phnom Penh government) was able to launch a major offensive that rivaled that of the Vietnamese offensive in the 1980s. These battlefield realities, in the opinion of this researcher, were the real causes of accommodating behavior by the resistance movements.

This book therefore offers a military and strategic history of the Cambodian civil war from 1979 to 1991, documenting the ideology, organization, order of battle, tactical doctrine, operational history, and strategy of the four factions in the war, as well as analyzing major campaigns and battles that underpinned the political negotiations from 1987 to 1991. This endeavor is supported by a combination of primary sources gathered over the past seven years as well as numerous visits to the former battlefields. The next section explains in detail the nature of these sources.

### 1.3 Notes on sources

The full history of the Cambodian civil war from 1979 to 1991 has always been hindered by a lack of sources. This book will rely heavily on data obtained from interviews or published materials that were constructed from interviews. This is not an easy task. The first problem with such accounts is imprecision. Memory loss is also an omnipresent issue. Assuming the interviewees are willing to talk and the interviewers have a well-constructed interview questionnaire or framework, memory loss still threatens to render

everything useless. Any attempt to interview someone suffering from memory loss will yield imprecise data. The respondents tend to tell generic stories without distinctive references such as date, locations, people, or events. I have encountered many of these cases, the case of the old man I met in front of the US embassy being one example. I will therefore treat those cases not as data points, but as anecdotes only.

Nonetheless, even those interviews that could yield precise data still have three potential pitfalls: bias, confusion, and faulty assumptions. First of all, bias is inherent in human nature. Not a lot of people are as enthusiastic to talk about failures as about success. Memory suppression, story omission, and plainly fabricated stories are usually present in a biased narrative. Any interview that has some elements of bias would not be able to stand up to rigorous academic scrutiny.

The second problem is confusion, or what we may call, honest mistakes. In the Cambodian civil war, just like many other wars, many battles were fought again and again on the same battlefield. With limited written accounts, even the most honest interviewees could easily mistake one event for another. In Cambodia, for example, an area rich in gemstone minerals known as Pailin (in Battambang province) had experienced major battles of similar magnitude in 1983, 1984, 1989, 1991, and 1994. In some other places such as the Staung district in Kampong Thom province, the place changed ownership so frequently, that high school examinations actually had to take place during the military offensive because war had already become a part of the local people's lives. In these instances, people could easily remember one event as occurring at completely the wrong date.

Finally, the third pitfall of interviews is faulty assumptions by the interviewees. Imperfection is inherent in all human begins. Ten people who have experienced the same event could easily remember it in ten different ways. If somehow we could organize them into a focus group and try to recount the story, they might even come up with a compromised, but inaccurate, grand narrative. Neither case is desirable.

To deal with these three pitfalls of interviews, this book employs two methodological countermeasures. The first one is quite simple, but needs to be applied at the time of interviews: be active during the interview, try to detect inconsistencies in the story, and ask challenging questions for clarifications. But this countermeasure can only go so far. No one can detect all inconsistencies, especially if the story is completely new to the interviewer. As a result, this book employs another simple, but laborious, methodological countermeasure: information cross-checking.

Writing about the history of a civil war is always difficult because all sources are prone to manipulation and bias, mostly because all sides feel the need to put a positive 'spin' on perceptions in the interest of propaganda. In fact, one could argue that a successful faction is usually the one with the best propaganda. All oral accounts, and all other sources for that matter in the following analysis, are considered to be unsubstantiated claims until they

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have been corroborated by other independent sources. If an account cannot be backed up by independent sources, or if the sources give conflicting data, the following analysis will clearly provide appropriate qualifications.

This book therefore employs a number of alternative sources to cross-check with the oral accounts. The book will strive for objectivity by cross-checking a claim in the materials of one faction with the materials from other sources. To try to achieve this objective, this book will make use of primary sources of all types, and from all factions, and will cross-check them with each other to try to reduce the effect of propaganda on the narrative of actual events.

Quantitatively, the sources are not evenly distributed across factions and types. Some factions have more primary material than others (such as communist versus non-communist factions). At the same time, some types of materials are more widely available than other types (such as interviews versus written sources). Of the four factions, the KPNLF received perhaps the most extensive coverage. As a pro-Western, non-communist faction, the KPNLF had many Anglophone friends who could recount, narrate, and publish its exploits. As is often the case, the history of the KPNLF paints a heroic story of a liberation movement that always had perfect plans, but whose demise was never discussed.

The readers are often left bewildered when the faction with apparently the best war plan of the war suddenly lost or agreed to an unfavorable political settlement. In the current book, I narrate the KPNLF story based on interviews and correspondence with military commanders, examination of the KPNLF bulletins, as well as information provided by other factions who fought against the KPNLF during the war.

The dreaded Khmer Rouge is a complex faction. Unlike the other three factions, the Khmer Rouge history spanned the entire length of the Cambodian civil war from 1970 to 1999. I have already written about the military history of the Khmer Rouge in a previous book, although the length restriction and the availability of sources at the time did not allow for a full examination of the war between 1979 and 1991. Unlike the other two factions, the main difficulty with constructing the Khmer Rouge historiography is, counterintuitively, the abundance of primary materials. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) holds what is perhaps the largest Khmer Rouge archive in Cambodia, if not the world, and it is largely accessible to scholars. Consequently, it is easy to mix up different periods, ignoring the different dynamics that affected the Khmer Rouge organization at different times.

For example, while studying the Cambodian resistance, thus denoting the period *before* 1991, Daniel Bultmann actually included some interviews about the soldiers' views on the Khmer Rouge's military organization *after* 1991.<sup>22</sup> As a matter of fact, the Khmer Rouge boycotted the political process in 1991 and lost all foreign support, and its military organization changed accordingly. Therefore, the Khmer Rouge's organization *before* 1991 was

drastically different from the one that operated *after* 1991, ideologically and militarily. It is not possible to guess the dynamics of its organization in one period by drawing inference from another period.

What these examples tell us is that any study relying on sources coming from only one faction is bound to be incomplete. Thus, this book will employ primary sources originating from all four factions. The first collection of the primary materials used by this book has never been examined by any scholar before. It belongs to the *de facto* government that was supported by the Vietnamese, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The PRK's military, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA), was perhaps the largest military in the Cambodian civil war after the PAVN. The first type of primary materials from this faction is the collection of official unit history that was published by the newly established Institute of Military History of the Cambodian Ministry of National Defense. Because it was written in peacetime after units of all factions were integrated together, these documents not only contain the history of the KPRA, but also that of the resistance groups who now have become part of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. As deputy director of the institute from 2013 to 2015, I have been personally involved in almost all of the interviews conducted in the process of constructing these documents.

Apart from this official job, I have also conversed and interviewed many other former officers during various personal research trips. In all, the interviewees include: former battalion commanders, former regimental commanders, former divisional commanders, the former deputy chief of general staff, former officers of the offensive (operations) section of the General Staff Headquarters, former militiamen, commanders of district military, commanders of provincial military commands, and commanders of military regions.

The second type of primary materials related to the KPRA is the official newspaper called the *Revolutionary Army*, which was later changed to the *People's Army* (for the sake of simplicity, the book will use the latter name throughout). I possess the issues in this newspaper from 1979 to 1991 (except the year 1983, which could not be found). Once again, this source has never been examined by any previous scholar. The third and similar type is the collection of the PRK's state news agency, SPK bulletin (*Sar Pormean Kampuchea*, Khmer for "Kampuchea Newspaper"), which was divided into three categories. The version with the "Blue" cover was the collection of international news. The version with the "Red" cover was intended for public dissemination and contained a high level of propaganda. The "Green" version, however, is marked "For Internal Reflection, Not for Public Dissemination" and generally contains unfiltered versions of articles selected from foreign mass media. As a result, many news articles were sharply critical of the PRK itself and even claims of KPRA battlefield defeats were reported in full. Occasionally, the Green version contained summaries of announcements by the minister of homeland defense about the updates of military situations.

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The fourth type is the collection of photos, raw video footage, newsreel, and televised interviews that I had received from many officers of the four factions throughout the years. I am very grateful for their support. This footage constitutes important pieces of history because in most cases, they mentioned names, dates, locations, and events, all of which are crucial elements in the study of battle and campaign analysis. Once again, these sources, just like many sources originating from the PRK, have never been examined by any scholar before.

The second collection of material belongs to the resistance movements. For each of them, I rely on the official bulletins during the war (from the 1980s until 1991) and these are complemented by additional interviews with former military commanders (from the battalion level upward). For the Khmer Rouge, in particular, I will make extensive use of its bi-monthly bulletins, which are fully illustrated in color and narrated the Khmer Rouge's significant activities every two months. Each issue exhibited pictures and accompanying captions that contain the explanation of events and dates. I was also able to obtain some video footage, the most interesting of which was shot by Khmer Rouge news crews during their capture of the town of Pailin in 1989. In the video, the narrator showed and described the matériels they had captured. More specifically, they had counted and shown the tanks that had been captured. This could be used to compare with other sources (written or interviews) to paint a clearer picture of how the battle unfolded, as well as the aftermath of the battle.

For the KPNLF, I have received tremendous support from a former high-ranking officer in the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces' General Staff Headquarters, whose correspondence allows me to fully understand the movement. Some rare photographs were also obtained from him. This officer wished to remain anonymous. I am very grateful for his assistance and will withdraw any reference to him as per his request. I also would like to assure him that the KPNLF's true history, or the closest version thereof, will be properly recorded. I also conducted two long interviews with the late General Dien Del before his passing in 2013. In addition, I was also able to interview several former regimental commanders who had been with the KPNLF since 1979.

As for the FUNCINPEC, I rely mostly on its ANS bulletin (*Armée Nationale Sihanoukhiste*) as well as the collection donated by former King Sihanouk to the *Archive National du Cambodge*. This type is complemented by the biography of former commanders as well as interviews with former battalion commanders of the ANS.

Lastly, to seek objectivity in the combination of all of these sources, I will also employ alternative sources that could be considered neutral by the standard of the war, i.e. foreign newspapers. The largest collection of materials used is the news archives of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) from 1979 to 1991. The FEER was a respectable regional magazine at the time and ran approximately one article on Cambodia in every issue.

The magazine struggled in the 2000s with the advent of electronic mass media and was finally forced to terminate its operations in December 2009 as it could no longer compete with internet readership. Nevertheless, the stories it covered in the 1980s and 1990s remain valuable to any researchers of the Cambodian civil war.

This book will try to ascertain the authenticity of events to be used in the campaign analyses based on the combination of all these materials. One advantage of being a Cambodian scholar is the ease with which I have been able to visit the former battlefields. Surely, a lot has changed in the last twenty-six years, but some terrain features remain unaltered, which have allowed me to conduct what could be tentatively called “staff ride.” The classic staff ride was pioneered by the Great General Staff of the Prussian army under Helmut von Moltke the Elder. Its main objective was to familiarize students who would later serve in the Great General Staff to understand the terrain that might be involved in future war.

The methodology I use in this book, however, is more closely associated with the staff ride as conducted by the US Army’s Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. As a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College, I was first exposed to this methodology during my command and general staff course there, participating in the Battle of Gettysburg staff ride and playing the role of Confederate General James Longstreet. In this methodology, we do not study the terrain that might be involved in future conflict, but rather we study historical battles and draw insights in terms of decision-making, effects of the terrain on the battle, or the relationship between weapons technology and tactics. As a participant in this great exercise, I was amazed by how our views of events completely changed once we arrived at the actual battlefield. Some decisions look so stupid and insane on paper but they are probably the best ones able to be made, given the nature of the actual terrain. Therefore, I strongly believe that any author who wants to study battles must visit the battlefields at least once to get a sense of what the fighters were facing when they faced off against each other.

But a good staff ride in the Fort Leavenworth fashion must be supported by a huge amount of historical materials and the details of this battle are largely known already. Participants simply put themselves in the shoes of the commanders and try to understand why and how the battle unfolded as it did. The battles of the Cambodian civil war between 1979 and 1991 and especially between 1989 and 1991, have never been studied before. Therefore, a Fort Leavenworth-style staff ride would be impossible within the Cambodian context. I did not attempt to conduct such a staff ride to construct the battlefield narrative in this book. Instead, I only used the insights I gleaned from participating in that staff ride to help me better walk the terrain and know what to look for. Therefore, in this book, after gathering the evidence and writing the first draft of the battle narrative, I then proceeded to walk the terrain to get a sense of where things were and

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what the fighters actually encountered during the thick of battle. This novel methodology paid great dividends.

For example, an officer claimed that during an attack in 1990, one Khmer Rouge division (around three hundred soldiers only in the Khmer Rouge's inflated organization) got bogged down as it tried to cross a bridge in Kampong Thom province. I then went to that bridge and calculated whether the heavy machine gun emplacement and the recoilless rifle gun on top of a water tower nearby could have fired on the troops at the bridge. The result showed that the infantry assault occurred within the effective range of the weapon emplacements on top of the water tower. In technical military terminology, the advancing infantry was in the "kill zone" of the heavy weapons.

A similar case happened in Battambang when a former officer claimed that the Khmer Rouge placed a recoilless rifle on the tank and fired on his divisional headquarters to harass the troops. Again, one needs to go to the battlefield and determine if this account is within the realms of possibility. In some other places such as Road 69 in Banteay Meanchey province, which surrounding remains more or less unchanged from 1990, it was a matter of driving along that road to determine if it was really militarily indefensible as many people had claimed.

In summary, written archives, newspaper, bulletin, interviews, open publications (unit history), historical photos, archive video footage, and my personal visits to the former battlefields are combined to produce each battlefield narrative in this book.

### 1.4 Military jargon survival kit

This section is designed to give some technical background and conceptual framework for readers who are not military professionals, have never been trained in the military, or are not students of security studies, to better understand the war in Cambodia. These concepts are crucial in understanding the "why" question, i.e. why did some factions succeed while others did not? The first framework is the relationship between politics and war. This section will discuss how military theorists understood how war should be fought and for what purposes. Also of particular importance is the relationship between guerrilla warfare and conventional warfare, and how both could be used to achieve the political purpose in a war of national liberation where the weaker side tries to overcome the stronger one. The war in Cambodia is a story of how both sides used this concept of a "People's War" to try to overcome each other. War transcended conventional battlefield tactics, and truly touched on capturing the hearts and minds of the people.

The third issue is the role of the tank. In most cases, a single weapon system does little to determine success on the battlefield. But in the impoverished battlefields of Cambodia, the tank is the premier limousine of war. It almost attained a sacred status, so much so that the resistance movements

typically equated the immobilization, destruction, or capture of the tank with significant success. The sub-section below will show that the resistance movement did this without thinking about the burden that came with capturing a tank: logistical arrangements, tactical doctrines, and the overall balance of force. The tactical use of the tank will be explained below to help readers understand how capturing the tank is only a psychological boost, not a decisive victory. This is to disabuse the notion that the resistance movements were on the brink of victory simply because they had captured some tanks from the enemy.<sup>23</sup>

The last sub-section will explain the basics of military organization and familiarize the general readers with the jargon of military organizations. We shall discuss the organization of the regiment, the division, and the general staff headquarters as well as the role and organization of the functional and support units. Readers will see that as the size of a military organization becomes big enough, so does the need for command, control and communication to be as good as possible. These things become exponentially more complicated when different military organizations attempted to pool resources under a unified or joint command. The major argument of this book is that politics is very important if one wants to carry out a People's War. Yet, politics is just a necessary condition; it is not a sufficient one. To capture power, one also has to think about military organization, which is not an easy thing to do.

#### 1.4.1 People's War

In the 1980s, Cambodia was a poor country and even that is a gross understatement. The Khmer Rouge virtually left everything in ruin; both the physical infrastructure and the fabrics of society itself were severely damaged with the intellectuals being the prime targets for elimination in order to build a new and pure society. The war, therefore, followed this societal condition. This was not a war involving rich and developed countries. This was not a war fought by waves of tanks and fleets of attack aircraft and bombers. Cambodian armies barely had trucks to transport their troops to the front. Alas, the best modes of transportation were ox carts and elephants. This was a war fought by men and women who were barefoot, devoid of any standard uniforms or insignias.

For example, in one issue of the *People's Army* newspaper, an article mentioned a significant defection where the defectors brought a lot of material with them. The article noted that "in October 1984, our People's Revolutionary Armed Forces have received 144 defectors, 114 guns, 6 canoes, and 3 bicycles."<sup>24</sup> Apparently, three bicycles and six canoes were considered so significant that they merit a citation in the *People's Army* newspaper. The PAVN did fight using bicycles for support during the Dien Bien Phu campaign, but they had tens of thousands of bicycles. Three bicycles would have been insignificant in this comparison.

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When the PAVN marched into Cambodia, they were perhaps the most affluent army on the battlefield. The PRK, as well as the resistance movements, did receive war material from their respective sponsors over the course of the war, but heavy equipment was still wanting. In such an impoverished war, the winner was the one who was able to fight in spite of the lack of materiels; in other words, the one who could use manpower to make up for the lack of materiels. The situation, at least on the general level, became similar to the ones that prevailed in China and Vietnam as they fought against the Japanese and United States, respectively.

While one may argue that there were so many differences between those wars and the war in Cambodia, there was at least one similarity, namely that a significantly weaker side tried to fight against the stronger one. These historical events produced a theory of guerrilla warfare by Mao Tse-tung in China and Vo Nguyen Giap in Vietnam. Both called for the mobilization of the general populace to overcome a technologically more advanced enemy. Both dubbed their theories “People’s War” theory. To a large extent, the war in Cambodia followed parts of these theories in the military organization of the two major factions. The KPRA and the Khmer Rouge were actually designed based on the People’s War model.

The difference is that in China and Vietnam, the belligerents had different military organizations while in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge and the KPRA were sibling disciples and used the People’s War model to fight against each other. In this model, typically the weaker side will start with guerrilla campaign, gradually building its forces as a conventional army to match its stronger enemy. In essence, a People’s War is protracted and guerrilla in nature. But in Cambodia, both the stronger side and the weaker side used People’s War model, competing with each other to mobilize the masses to their cause and join their respective armies. This sub-section will begin the discussion with the concept of guerrilla war versus conventional war.

The term “guerrilla,” by definition, is more about tactics than strategy. A tactic of hit-and-run, avoiding the strong, attacking the weak, dispersing the enemy’s concentrated forces, using the enemy’s supplies, and protecting one’s own forces etc. are only a few defining characteristics of guerrilla warfare. Indeed, conventional forces can also use small-unit tactics to disrupt the enemy’s supplies or outflank a well-defended target.<sup>25</sup> However, when the term “guerrilla warfare” is used, it normally denotes a case of asymmetric warfare in which one side is far larger and stronger than the other, prompting the smaller side to resort primarily to guerrilla tactics.

The first theorist to conceptualize modern guerrilla warfare was Mao Tse-tung. His theory could be approached from various levels. At the tactical level, this is a theory about how to conduct guerrilla warfare; it is about how a weaker side uses guerrilla tactics to defeat the stronger one. At the heart of the matter, however, this war is strategically a revolutionary war, an armed struggle intended to radically change society. Because of its revolutionary nature, and by definition, the guerrilla is a weaker side trying

to fight against the stronger, established authority (the government). Given his experience with the Japanese occupiers during World War II and the struggle against the Chinese nationalists, Mao theorized that guerrilla warfare is protracted in nature and needs to be conducted in three stages.<sup>26</sup>

In the first stage, the guerillas are typically too weak to mount any successful offensive against the government or established authority. Mao argued that in this stage, or what he called “strategic defensive” for the guerillas and “strategic offensive” for the government, the guerillas must build the political support of the people.<sup>27</sup> For Mao, because a smaller force attempts to fight a larger and more sophisticated enemy, the former must have the support of the people. This required an appealing ideology and effective political programs that could address the social and political grievances, thus capable of mobilizing the population. This appeal to the people will provide the guerrillas with recruits, sanctuary, resources and intelligence. In essence, this is a “People’s War,” as the guerrillas intend to use manpower to overcome technology and material resources. This concept appears to be born out of Mao’s assessment of the war against the Chinese nationalists and the Japanese occupiers, where the communists initially tried to overthrow the government without a broad-based popular support and failed disastrously, leading to the Long March.

Tactically, in this first stage, Mao maintained that the guerillas must accept the possible loss of many cities to the government forces: the guerillas must not try to defend these cities through fixed defense or they will be crushed (perhaps again drawing from Mao’s own experience).<sup>28</sup> The best course of action for the guerillas, according to Mao, is to mount mobile warfare.<sup>29</sup> Mao assumed that by forcing the government to defend its rear supply line along stretches of railways and highways, significant government forces would be diverted from offensive operation, thus giving the guerrillas some breathing space.<sup>30</sup>

If the guerrilla does this correctly, then the war will enter the second stage, when the government still retains offensive capabilities but finds it increasingly difficult to mobilize these with low cost. Most likely, the government then becomes more and more averse towards taking the offensive. As a result, the government will contract its forces in order to consolidate the gains and hold on to the territories already under control.<sup>31</sup> Mao called this action, “strategic consolidation” for the government, and this second phase is called “strategic stalemate” since both sides do not have the capacity to mount large-scale offensives. This stalemate then allows the guerillas to move into unoccupied or lightly occupied areas to implement their own “pacification” campaign by building their local authority and militias. The guerrillas should not engage in large-scale fighting since the government is still capable of mounting last-resort offensive actions.<sup>32</sup> In this stage, both sides will appear to divide the territory for control. All of these are possible only if the guerrillas succeed in building a strong political base and popular support in the first stage.

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Finally, the guerillas will reach the third and final stage, the “strategic offensive,” when the government loses its offensive capabilities and is on the strategic retreat. Positional warfare or fixed defense will become necessary, and the guerillas will expand the areas under their control, this time by fighting to hold on to those areas. As the name implies, the main objective in this stage is purely military from the guerillas’ point of view, which would result in them trying to seize power through large-scale engagements. In other words, in the third stage, the guerrillas “graduate” to the conventional level, and the war becomes a conventional one (i.e. a conventional army faces off against another conventional army). This book asserts that when studying guerrilla warfare, scholars must determine when this “operational graduation” occurs and whether it is timely or not.

The Vietnamese model of People’s War closely followed the Chinese model. But the Vietnamese theory, as articulated by General Vo Nguyen Giap, delved deeper into the detailed political and military organization of the war. The Vietnamese model is based on a concept dubbed “đấu tranh,” Vietnamese for “the struggle.”<sup>33</sup> According to Douglas Pike, this concept combined “armed đấu tranh” (which consisted of a hybrid application of guerrilla war and conventional war) and “political đấu tranh” (which includes armed political actions among friendly units, enemy units, and the population).<sup>34</sup> In other words, the concept blends political actions with military power.

Similar to Mao, Giap’s concept of People’s War was much influenced by his war experience against the Chinese nationalists (the contingent that operated in northern Vietnam), the Japanese, the French, and later the United States.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, throughout most of his career, Giap was repeatedly faced with the insistence from his comrades to launch early conventional offensives. Most of those operations were premature and were defeated by the stronger enemy. Going a level deeper than Mao, Giap drew the lessons that the odds of the conventional offensive being successful largely depends on the maturity of the political situation.<sup>36</sup> Without broad-based support of the population, the conventional offensive tends to fail against the technologically stronger enemy. So, choosing the timing of the operational graduation is crucial.

This is where there is a break between the People’s War as understood in the Socialist bloc and the less well-known People’s War in the Free World tradition. This break was nowhere more evident than the war in Cambodia from 1979 to 1991. Early, we postulate that the communist factions, the Khmer Rouge and the KPRA both used the People’s War model as developed by Mao and Giap. To be fair, even the Cambodian non-communist factions also boasted that they, too, were followers of the People’s War model, albeit a Taiwanese one.<sup>37</sup>

After the Chinese nationalists were defeated and chased out of mainland China by the People’s Liberation Army in 1949, it seemed that Chiang Kai-Shek took special interests in the communist model and actually developed

his own version of People's War. But there was a crucial difference between the two versions, at least as they were applied in Cambodia from 1979 to 1991. Based on the writing of and interviews with the former officials of the non-communist resistance movement KPNLF, its "political warfare school" emphasized that their political campaign was to accompany armed resistance and it must be people-oriented.<sup>38</sup> However, no other detail was offered.

In stark contrast, in Mao's and Giap's People's War models, the guerrillas or revolutionaries, especially military officers and propagandists are required to understand what they called "contradictions" in society. Especially visible in Giap's writings, and taken from the Marxist description of the same concept, "contradiction" is a social reality, the driving force that pushes society to revolutions and changes. The guerrillas were then instructed to exploit these contradictions, transform them into grievances to mobilize people for war. For example, Giap noted that one contradiction in Vietnam was the fact that the country was dominated by the peasants while Vietnam was run like a feudal society and it was the landlord class that owned most of the land.<sup>39</sup> According to Giap, this contradiction could be transformed into grievances, something the guerrillas could exploit in order to mobilize people for their causes.

All over the country, however, the political situation might not be the same from province to province.<sup>40</sup> The fact that a revolutionary movement in one province could launch a conventional offensive does not mean that other movements in other provinces could do the same. The contradiction might be different, so also is the nature of the grievances. The guerrillas, in Giap's theory, must be able to grasp this situation before deciding on the appropriate level of armed resistance.<sup>41</sup> In essence, in stage two of the People's War, Giap's theory was more detailed than Mao's formulation. Both, however, were very concerned about the appropriate time for the operational graduation, the start of the stage where the guerrillas become a conventional army launching conventional offensive to take power.

In all, the communist version of People's War does not only consider the people to be important, it also actively requires the guerrillas to seek out the contradictions, and then transform them into grievances and exploit them to mobilize people for the cause. This, in turn, requires that the military itself exhibits exemplary discipline, branding themselves as the servants of the people.<sup>42</sup> This is the concept of "political đấu tranh" where the political actions were applied in the military to try to build a disciplined army. The communist military establishments created the institution of "political commissar" precisely to manage these political actions within the military chain of command as well as the rank-and-file.<sup>43</sup> In the Western World tradition of People's War, "political warfare" is just one branch of the army. In contrast, in the communist version, the original version of People's War, political warfare is the heart and soul of the army, the basis on which a revolutionary war is to be conducted.

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We shall end this section by quoting a description of what effects the application of the People's War concept might have had on the communist fighters in Vietnam. In the wake of the attack on the US Embassy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive in 1968, American news channel, NBC reported:

The Viet Cong commandos who attacked the US Embassy and other key places in downtown Saigon were ready and willing to die. They expected to die. In this war, a man willing to die is the most dangerous weapon. There is no way the Americans can mass-produce this weapon for their South Vietnamese ally, not with technology, not with money.<sup>44</sup>

To be clear, it was not communism that stirred such ferocity, it was social and political grievances. In the People's War model, the communists just happened to focus on exploiting those.

### 1.4.2 *Politics and war*

The Western World is not totally naïve on the theory of war, however. Perhaps the most famous and elegant, but also less well-understood, war theory is that of the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz. A witness of the Napoleonic War and the fragile existence of the Prussian state, Clausewitz was perplexed by the mysterious and often unpredictable nature of war. Writing in a dialectical style, his unfinished, but famous, book *On War*, is a timeless work that can still explain the dynamics of war today.<sup>45</sup>

The first Clausewitzian formulation is “war is a mere continuation of politics by other means.”<sup>46</sup> For Clausewitz, war is a serious matter and ought to be fought for serious political purposes. This is so because the more intense the war becomes, the more sacrifice the state needs to ask from society. Without a worthy cause, and a clear policy that society thinks is worth the sacrifice, the state will find it incredibly difficult to prosecute the war. Above all, Clausewitz believed that winning a war largely depends on the management of three major elements: the army, the policy (or strategy), and the people.<sup>47</sup> If there is a problem in one or more of these elements, victory is unlikely. A successful war, according to Clausewitz, tends to be one where the state has realistic and feasible strategic objectives, the army is capable enough to achieve said objectives, and the people are behind the state and the army.

Certainly, this is an ideal state that seems too good to be true. In war, Clausewitz warned against the belief in the “perfect plan” to win the war. He introduced the concept of “frictions,” about which he wrote:

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. [...] Countless minor incidents—the kind you can never really foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls far short of the intended goal.<sup>48</sup>

The policy-army-people trinity could be perfect at the beginning of the war, but as the war intensifies, it could easily be broken, especially the people's morale when the war starts producing casualties.

But the concept of friction is applicable down to the tactical level as well. One must always plan for the worst because a perfect plan simply does not exist. The enemy is generally smart and he also wants to win, thus he keeps guessing and countering your own plans. The clever enemy, in the Clausewitzian conception of war, is a major source of friction. There are two ways to mitigate the negative effects of friction. The first one advocated by Clausewitz involves attacking with utmost effort so that even if the effort falls short, it might still be in the acceptable realm.<sup>49</sup> But another way to counter friction is to have resources in reserve to remedy the situation when events do not unfold according to plans. In the impoverished battlefield of the Cambodian civil war, both of these measures mean manpower.

In order to wrestle control from the state, the resistance movements (i.e. the guerrillas) would require major campaigns and conventional offensives at some point. And the larger the campaign or the more complicated it is, the more serious friction could become. To have a better chance of winning the war, one must have a large pool of manpower to use in the offensive, as well as in reserve, in order to prepare for frictions when launching the major conventional offensives. This, in turn, requires careful and effective political actions just like Mao, Giap, and Clausewitz had suggested. In essence, a People's War is a political-military struggle. Such was the nature of war in Cambodia from 1979 to 1991.

#### *1.4.3 The role of the tank in the Cambodian civil war*

Revered and dreaded in equal measures, the main battle tank has always been an important variable in the Cambodian civil war. However, as noted, it is usually incorrect to point to any single weapon system as the decisive factor that can affect the outcome of war. But in Cambodia, tanks have always played a major role, so much so, that many warriors considered them to be a battle winner. This importance requires us to discuss briefly how a tank can be used on the battlefield and the requirements for each tactical doctrine to work effectively.

Tanks have traditionally been fearsome foes for any infantryman that has to defend against them. Any assault that involves tanks tends to be a major one. But the presence of the tanks could also cloud the judgment of scholars, especially when they are led to believe in things like "the guerrillas lost because they did not have tanks." In reality, while the tank is a fearsome weapon platform, it is wrong to believe that the tanks are invulnerable. If a tank moves into a group of infantrymen with high density of anti-tank weapons, the tank would not last even a minute. If there is no anti-tank weapon, the infantry could resort to anti-tank mines. Failing that, infantrymen could resort to cutting supply lines, denying the fuel and

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ammunitions supplies. After all, a tank that cannot move is as good as a destroyed tank.

Above all, tanks do not automatically command success on the battlefield. Success will also come from good logistical arrangements, training, and doctrine. First, tanks voraciously consume fuel. Without good logistical arrangement, the tank will lose mobility and will become a liability. The second issue is tactical doctrine: how is the tank to be used and for what purposes? The resistance movements in Cambodia learnt the hard way that mere possession of the tanks did not necessarily guarantee victory.

Historically, tanks could be used in three major ways. First, the tanks are used in combined armed warfare to fight methodical battles.<sup>50</sup> In this doctrine, the tanks are always used with infantry, with both arms protecting and supporting each other during assault. Due to the slow infantry movement, the tank will also have to move slowly. The synchronization is necessary to ensure mutual protection and support between the two arms. Also due to this slow and methodical operational tempo, the operation could be supported by artillery from static firebases. In this tactical doctrine, mobility is sacrificed for firepower and protection. This usually happens when the attacking force launches a frontal assault on fortified positions. In Cambodia, during the dry season offensive in 1983–1984 and 1984–1985, the PAVN adopted this doctrine in the assaults against the resistance movements' strongholds.

The second doctrine was well known to Western scholars: the *blitzkrieg* battle plan, German for “lightning war.” The blitzkrieg doctrine instead traded protection for speed and mobility to provoke fear and shock in the enemy’s formations and induce its collapse. The infantrymen that accompanied the tanks then needed to either be mechanized or motorized to keep up with the tanks, which severely restricted the number of troops that could go with the tank. In this doctrine, the attacker would concentrate forces at a narrow sector, pierce the front line, and move deep into the defender’s rear, paralyzing the defender’s formation before he could react.<sup>51</sup> Speed is of the essence. Because of this, firepower cannot be provided by static artillery firebases (who cannot keep up with the tanks) but has to be supplied by an able air force. This, in turn, requires air superiority during the assault.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, this is an expensive and complicated operation, indeed a high-risk, high-payoff operation. Germany was able to defeat France in 1941 in only six weeks as the French and British failed to react with any decisive blow. In Cambodia, blitzkrieg occurred in 1979 when the PAVN defeated the Khmer Rouge and pushed them to the Cambodian-Thai border. The Vietnamese publications and foreign media described the campaign as “Blooming Lotus,” due to the fact that the PAVN attacked narrow sectors and then expanded its control afterwards, like a blooming lotus, hence the name.<sup>53</sup> But in reality, it was a classic blitzkrieg.

The third way in which the tank could be used was a rather improvised doctrine, quite unknown to the Western military literature, but is frequently

found on the impoverished battlefields of the Third World countries. James Quinlivan called it “large-caliber, drive-by shootings.”<sup>54</sup> In this doctrine, the tank is exclusively used for its firepower, which can be moved to anywhere on the battlefield. For most of the war in Cambodia, this was one of the most favored tactics. Sometimes, the soldiers employed the 100mm rifled gun on the T-54 main battle tank; at other times, they made use of the 76.2mm rifled tank gun on the PT-76 medium amphibious assault tank. In some cases, soldiers on both sides mounted recoilless rifles on the tank and the tank itself was transformed into mobile artillery.

During the Cambodian civil war, blitzkrieg was used only once by the PAVN in 1979. For the rest of the war, the high-caliber, drive-by shooting was the most favored tactic. Things changed, however, after 1989. The resistance movements started to receive modern anti-tank guns from their sponsors, specifically, the German-made Armbrust and the 84mm M2 Carl Gustav recoilless rifle. As effective tank-killer weapons arrived on the battlefield in large numbers, the belligerent began to exercise caution when using tanks.

As the high-caliber, drive-by shooting doctrine became too dangerous, all sides started to shift to the methodical combined arms doctrine where tanks, infantry, and artillery would work together in slow operational tempo. But the resistance movements fared worse, because they were unable to come up with a suitable doctrine that could help them employ the tanks to achieve decisive victory. Armor doctrine was one of the challenges the resistance movements could not adapt to, as they struggled to transform their organization from a guerrilla army to a conventional army capable of launching major operations and decisively defeating its opponent in order to capture state power.

#### ***1.4.4 A note on modern military organization***

Cambodia has seen almost all types of political and military organizations. The military organization of all sides was typical of modern armies. A unit was composed of three maneuver units (i.e. the fighting units) of smaller echelon. Thus, a corps (usually called “Front”) typically controlled three divisions, one division controlled three regiments, one regiment controlled three battalions, and one battalion controlled three companies. This pattern was usually repeated down to the squad. Sometimes, a special unit, the brigade, was established and functioned like a regiment, but the brigade had more strength and capabilities than a regiment. In Khmer language, the translation of brigade is “small division,” a name that is very telling. The establishment of a brigade is usually a compromise, because while one can have a unit that can function like a division, the brigade is small enough so that it is possible to create many of them.

While all of the echelons bear organizational resemblance, there is a major break at the level between a battalion and a regiment. At the regimental

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level, the number of soldiers becomes large enough so that the regiment could have its own specialized units for combat support. Therefore, in addition to the maneuvering or fighting unit, at the regimental level we start seeing companies or platoons that are specialized in artillery, transportation, armor, anti-tank, or combat engineers. All of these units do not belong to the division, but are organic to the regiment itself. The major task of these specialized units is to support the fighting units and to make them more effective in carrying out their mission. As a result, the regiment has a headquarters to coordinate the cooperation and synchronization between these different arms. Units at lower level normally do not have such support units and when they need support they have to request to a higher level such as regiment or division. The regiment is the echelon where the support units are organic to the unit itself.

At the division level, things become more complicated. A division typically has three infantry regiments and a variety of other support units. Depending on the mission, the division could be augmented with an armor regiment or additional infantry regiment. Nevertheless, if a division has more than three regiments, then command, control, and communication could become a serious problem in major battle. In addition to the fighting regiments, the division would have around ten “functional” units, i.e. those that are organized to serve specific functions. Examples of the functional units include a communication battalion, artillery battalion, combat engineer battalion, medical battalion, air defense battalion, and reconnaissance battalion. Richer countries could afford to have expensive units such as combat aviation, armor, anti-tank, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN), military police, or special forces. During battle, one major task of the divisional headquarters is to allocate support to the different fighting units.

One can easily see that because the standard division has only three regiments, it tends to lose flexibility when the battlefield requires more than three targets. To solve this problem, military commanders usually organize a “task force,” which is an ad hoc arrangement of various sizes (typically battalion or regiment size). The soldiers, specialized units, and equipment (such as tanks and artillery) could be drawn from various different units, and the task force was established for a very specific mission and for a limited time. This is especially useful when the whole unit is preoccupied, but could also provide some surplus forces for the task force. All task forces had no name or number and are represented on the map in this book by the number of their parent units.

Another unit, the general staff headquarters, of which there is only one for an armed force, is generally organized as the foremost provider of functional units at the operational and strategic level. It could control some division or independent regiments (meaning the regiment does not belong to any division) but its main “teeth” are the functional units, which it could allocate to different battlefields. In Cambodia, the General Staff

Headquarters of the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA) mostly allocated tanks, artillery, and multiple rocket launchers to the battlefields where the maneuver units needed them most.

The last point to note about military organization is the number of troops in the unit. This issue will be explained in detail in Chapter 3, but here it is necessary to highlight some preliminary cautions. The number of troops in one particular unit varied from one army to another. The Vietnamese units in Cambodia had the largest number of troops compared to units of the same echelon from other parties. A typical Vietnamese division had around 10,000 troops, while the KPRA division had only 5,000 troops on average. Command, control, and communication would become a serious problem if the division were larger than this. Other factions had a tendency to inflate the numbers in their organization. A division belonging to the army of Prince Sihanouk and the KPNLF had between 1,000 and 2,000 men, which was the equivalent of a KPRA regiment. The Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, had a complicated military structure. The largest division could have more than 2,000 troops while the smallest ones could have between three and five hundred soldiers. Chapter 3 will explain this issue in more detail.

## 1.5 Plan of the book

This book will narrate the history of the four factions in the Cambodian civil war, tracing their origins in the late 1970s until the final showdown between 1989 and 1991. The book will focus on an area that has received no attention whatsoever in the current literature, namely the military campaigns that underpinned the political negotiations from 1989 to 1991. Other crucial issues in the history of the four factions that have never been studied before will also be analyzed. This book is therefore divided into seven chapters. This first chapter introduces the book as well as some technical concepts.

Chapter 2 will condense the history of Cambodia from the 1960s to 1979. Because this period has received significant studies by other scholars already, major events will be explained only briefly. The value added that this book offers in that chapter is the origin of the Phnom Penh government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea from when five anti-Khmer Rouge movements met on 2 December 1978 to establish a unified front (with Vietnamese support) to defeat the Khmer Rouge. Chapter 3 will narrate the political ideology, strategy, military organization, and tactical doctrine of the three resistance movements, namely Prince Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC, the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge.<sup>55</sup> Among the three movements, the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC have already received ample attention. The value added of this book is the recording of some significant history of the KPNLF that has not received enough attention in the literature. The most important and novel point of the chapter is the study of the Khmer Rouge's military

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organization, political ideology, and tactical doctrine between 1979 and 1991. The chapter will also bring to light some crucial information on the Vietnamese dry season offensive in 1983, 1984, and 1985 and how the resistance movements adapted to the onslaught.

Chapter 4 is entirely dedicated to the PRK and its military, the KPRA. The Vietnamese military formation in Cambodia will also be studied, since it was the PAVN that helped build the KPRA. Most of the information in this chapter is new to the literature. Chapter 4 will submit a novel argument, namely that the KPRA had done well in protecting the state. Towards the later part of the 1980s, this army gradually stepped up and assumed the responsibility that hitherto had been taken by the PAVN. Vietnam played a key role in building the PRK but eventually it was the PRK itself that fought to ensure its own survival. The victory was not smooth and instead was punctuated by military rout, confusion, and panic, but it was a victory nonetheless.

Chapter 5 presents a campaign analysis of the major offensives that the four factions carried out in the aftermath of the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989. Throughout the book, only major battles will be studied. The book defines “major battle” as a battle where the combined forces committed by both sides was at least a brigade (roughly 1,500 soldiers). This arbitrary measure is used because this book only studies battles that could be decisive, i.e. battles that could win the war. Of course, one should not underestimate the heroism of a group of ten fighters ambushing their enemy. Yet, the outcome of such small encounters is unlikely to have any significant impact on the overall war. With a regiment or a brigade, however, one side can capture a district. If that could be multiplied or expanded to the provincial level, then the war could be won. At least, such victories can still be used as bargaining chips during political negotiations. This measure also restricts the geographical areas that can be counted in this study, namely military regions 4, 5, and one exception in the military region 3.

Chapter 6 studies the residual battles, those that were fought not for winning the war but for capturing as much territory as possible, because the four factions had already agreed on the major points of the political settlement to end the war. The last chapter summarizes the lessons from the Cambodian civil war from 1979 to 1991 and conclude the book.

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years. My research here certainly cannot undo the afflictions that had occurred to my family, and to other families, but at least it can provide some closure, helping them and Cambodian society as a whole to understand one of the most terrible disasters in Cambodian history. Such is my personal aspiration for this book.

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The unsung heroes of the war also deserve gratitude. This was a civil war. I am sure all sides had legitimate reason to fight, even though some of the elements might have had opportunist or ulterior motives for the fight (which is quite inevitable in any war). I endeavor to treat their struggles equally and I will avoid disparaging any movement. Many interviewees requested that both their names and if possible, the names of their former foes (especially the Khmer Rouge fighters) which they described in the interviews, be left anonymous. The main reason, they asserted, was to forget the bitter past in order to maintain a bright future together. We then agreed that in such cases, only the name of the units would be identified, and individual names will remain anonymous as per the request. I omitted the names out of respect for these officers and soldiers and I believe they could be better included if these sources become authors of their own biographies.

I would also like to thank the former officers and soldiers of the four factions who provided me with insightful interviews. They are unsung heroes of the nation and they are an important part of my book. In this book, I will put only “former commander,” “former officer,” “former soldiers,” “former cadre,” etc. instead of their real names. Anyone interested in fact checking can contact me personally for the details. Among these former officers, I would like to thank one KPNLAF officer in particular, who had served in a high-ranking position in the KPNLAF-FUNCINPEC’s Joint Military Command. He wanted the history to be properly recorded but he thought that his name would only amplify the rifts of the past. This book will therefore record the true history without making reference to his name as per his request.

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## Notes

- 1 His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk was both king and head of state at the time. However, the conventional literature almost unanimously referred to the king as Prince Sihanouk. This book adopts this appellation to avoid confusion. It was also a fitting decision given the fact that most of the time from 1970 to 1993, the survival of the monarchy was often in doubt. It was not until 1993 that Prince Sihanouk once again became king.
- 2 The Western literature often refers to the PAVN as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), northern regular soldiers, while the PLAF was contemptuously known as the Viet Cong, which was made up of local guerrillas in South Vietnam. This book adopts the historically neutral name of PAVN and PLAF.
- 3 What Vietnam did in 1979 in Cambodia was controversial: liberation versus invasion (aggression). For survivors of the Khmer Rouge killings, the Vietnamese action was a liberation. Even Prince Sihanouk also accepted a limited version of this story. For other forces, including the remnant of the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge itself, what Vietnam did in 1979 was not liberation but an invasion, a blatant act of aggression on a sovereign nation. What was interesting was that the Cambodian non-communist forces, while condemning Vietnam's action as an aggression, did not actually accept the Khmer Rouge legitimacy as well. For them, both the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge forces were reviled in equal measure. This book believes there are merits in both sides of the argument and will not choose sides. Instead, this book will adopt a neutral term to describe the Vietnamese actions in 1979: intervention.
- 4 I apologize in advance for the omission of some important works that, due to space constraints, have not been mentioned here. The literature review here is not intended to be a comprehensive one, but is aimed at merely informing readers about where to start in each area.

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- 5 There is still no agreement as to the exact death toll of the Khmer Rouge genocide and mass killing. Estimates range from 800,000 to 3,000,000. But scholars tend to accept a 1,000,000 benchmark. For a discussion on the issue, see Craig Etcheson, “Mapping Project 1999: The Analysis—‘The Numbers’—Quantifying Crimes Against Humanity in Cambodia,” DC-Cam. Accessed 12 January 2015. [www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Maps /Mass\\_Graves\\_Study.htm](http://www.d.dccam.org/Projects/Maps /Mass_Graves_Study.htm).
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- 20 Sola, *Le Cambodge de Sihanouk*, 79.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Bultmann, *Inside Cambodian Insurgency*.

23 Conboy's *Cambodian Wars* is one example where the KPNLAF's capture of the tanks was implicitly hailed as a significant victory.

24 Editorial staff, "News in the Armed Forces," *People's Army*, 15 November 1984.

25 Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert, eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 834; and William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare, Theory and Practice* (New York: Presidio Press, 1996), 3–4.

26 Paret et al., eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 815–862; and Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel Griffith (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000). These two works provide an accessible interpretation of Mao's theory. A more nuanced and complex version can be found in volume II, *On Protracted War*, of another of Mao's writings. Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: 5 Volumes* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967–1969). Using the strategic interactions method, Mao argued that other external factors such as local and international political support, the enemy's morale (soldiers and civilians) and economic power need to be taken into account in order to win such a war. See Mao, *Selected Works*, vol. II, 137.

27 Contrary to typical portrayal of his theory, Mao actually considers political support to mean both local and international political support. For example, in his writing, we can find numerous references to "the aid from the Soviet Union." See, for example, Mao, *Selected Works*, vol. II, 137–138.

28 Mao, *Selected Works*, vol. II, 137. Mao used the Kuomintang military as an example to show how a fixed defense in this stage is counterproductive for the guerillas.

29 In addition to Mao and Che Guevara (yet another theorist of revolutionary warfare), Vo Nguyen Giap is another theorist of guerrilla warfare. In the second stage, Giap also advocated the use of mobile warfare, but he defined mobile warfare differently. According to Giap, mobile warfare will be conducted by regular units in conjunction with the guerilla forces. This seems to be the middle ground between Mao (who was cautious in the use of regular units in early phases) and Che (who was not shy in using regular units), but it also mirrored Giap's application of his theory in Vietnam where the PAVN fought vigorously alongside the PLAF. See Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 1962).

30 Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 66–69. The offensive capabilities of the counterinsurgent can be drawn down by forcing the counterinsurgent to defend these long supplies lines.

31 Ibid., 138.

32 Shy and Collier noted that in the second stage Mao made significant references to the Jominian concept of interior and exterior lines. See Paret et al., eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, 884. In *Selected Works*, Mao made references to one of the most enduring natures of guerrilla warfare: the war has no clear fixed front. Mao calls it "A War of Jig-Saw Pattern." See Mao, *Selected Works*, vol. II, 145.

33 Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), chapter 9 described the concept in detail.

34 Ibid., 212.

35 Giap, *People's War*.

36 Ibid., 87.

37 Kong Thann, *The Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) & Road to Peace* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Angkor, 2009).

32 *Introduction: the chronic war*

38 This is the impression I got from my correspondence with a former high-ranking officer of the KPNLAF as well as the book by Kong Thann, *The Khmer People's National Liberation Front*.

39 Giap, *People's War*, 27–31.

40 Ibid., 76–77.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 129.

43 Ibid., 121. The political commissar gives political guidance while the military commander decides on the force dispositions.

44 Howard Tuckner, “*The Frank McGee Report*,” NBC Televised Report, Special Edition, 10 March 1968.

45 There are many translated versions of his book, sometimes with very different meanings. This current book uses the Princeton edition, which is generally considered as the standard translation on Clausewitz’s book. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Reprint ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

46 Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

47 Ibid., 89.

48 Ibid., 119–121. The cryptic chapter vii provided some clues as to the importance of the concept of “frictions.”

49 Ibid.

50 For a review of combined arms methodical battles and blitzkrieg, see Jonathan M. House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

51 House, *Combined Arms Warfare*, 107–135.

52 Ibid.

53 Nayan Chanda, “Cambodia: Fifteen Days that Shook Asia,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 January 1979.

54 James T. Quinlivan, “Artillery Returns to the Battlefield in the War against ISIL,” *War on the Rocks*, 11 January 2016. Accessed 11 March 2016. <http://warontherocks.com/2016/01/artillery-returns-to-the-battlefield-in-the-war-against-isil/>.

55 FUNCINPEC is the acronym of the French name, *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, Et Coopératif* (National United Front for a Cambodia that is Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative). The Khmer Rouge also adopted a formal name, the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK). They also retained the official name of their state, Democratic Kampuchea. In this section, to avoid confusion, this book will use the term Khmer Rouge to denote both the political and military organization of this movement. Without a clear explanation (in Chapter 3), the acronym will only confuse readers.

## 2 Road to war

### 2.1 The colonial heritage

A major part of modern Cambodian history is dominated by the complicated nature of Cambodian–Vietnamese relations. History of violent relations between Cambodia and its neighboring countries, Thailand (formerly Siam) and Vietnam (formerly Annam), run deep through Cambodian collective memory. Seeing the potential danger of Cambodia being divided by the two hostile neighbors along the Mekong River, King Ang Doung of Cambodia (who came to the throne with Siamese support) began courting French authorities in Singapore around 1853.<sup>1</sup> Initially, this scheme was interrupted by Siamese threats, but in 1863, Cambodia had become a French protectorate.

Because of the French control, a large swath of territory known as Cochinchina (which was formerly Cambodian territory until the seventeenth century) eventually became part of the new Republic of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> This alarmed many Cambodians especially given the history of Vietnamese expansion from the southern border of China, known as the “Southward March,” which completely destroyed the Champa Kingdom in 1832.<sup>3</sup> Many Cambodians saw the Vietnamese influence in its political affairs in the 1950s as potentially another episode in this expansion. This fear would come to engulf both the left-wing revolutionaries and the right-wing politicians.

Before the First Indochina War, the independence movement in Vietnam organized itself as the Indochina Communist Party (ICP). Between 1930 and 1954, a section of the ICP became the founding members of the future Cambodian leftist movement.<sup>4</sup> The Cambodian left-wing revolutionaries who would come to power later, considered the ICP as a Vietnamese ploy to dominate Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> The Cambodian communist movement eventually organized its own party, the Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party (KPRP), on 28 June 1951.

After Cambodia gained independence in 1953, Prince Sihanouk established the Sangkum Reastr Niyum party (Khmer for “populist society party”) and won a landslide victory in the general election in 1955. The KPRP also participated in the election, as did other minority right-wing parties, but did not win any seats in the national assembly. At this point, the communist movement in Cambodia had little hope of taking power from the popular

Prince Sihanouk. However, complicated international events soon changed that situation.

Prince Sihanouk's rule came at a difficult time. In order to avoid the adverse effects of the Cold War, Prince Sihanouk adopted a policy of neutrality and non-alignment. However, despite this official policy declaration, events forced Prince Sihanouk's foreign policy to fluctuate between support for the United States and North Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

In 1959, several right-wing politicians and military officers were implicated in a failed coup attempt against Prince Sihanouk.<sup>7</sup> In his memoir, Prince Sihanouk wrote that he believed the US was behind the failed coup attempt.<sup>8</sup> On 26 April 1965, Cambodia broke diplomatic relations with the US.<sup>9</sup> Taking advantage of favorable conditions, North Vietnam tried to ensure that no communist movement in Cambodia threatened Prince Sihanouk's rule in exchange for the Prince's acquiescence of its sanctuaries along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. North Vietnam insisted that the Cambodian communists should adhere to a political struggle (i.e. low intensity and long term) rather than a coordinated political-military one (i.e. potentially decisive).<sup>10</sup> The KPRP's prospect for taking power was bleak. It had no army, no broad popular support, no external support, and the public wing of the party was under threat by the Cambodian regime.

It was amidst this confusion within the Cambodian communist party that a small group of new leaders emerged. These leaders would later establish the reign of terror in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 and bear the notorious name "Khmer Rouge." The term "Khmer Rouge" started to appear in Prince Sihanouk's speeches in the 1960s when he used the term to describe all Cambodian communists. "Khmer" denotes both the language of Cambodia and ethnic Cambodians while "Rouge" is the French word for "Red," a popular denomination of all things communist.

## 2.2 The Radical Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)

The communist movement in Cambodia was hit by one disaster after another. The KPRP participated in the general election in 1955, but did not win any seats in the national assembly. In addition, because Prince Sihanouk leaned towards North Vietnam in the 1960s, the latter cut off vital support to the communist movement in Cambodia to avoid antagonizing Prince Sihanouk. Finally, in 1962, the second man in the KPRP defected to the Cambodian government and helped the government hunt down many Cambodian senior communist leaders.<sup>11</sup>

According to one account, in the midst of this upheaval, twenty-one junior members of the KPRP met at a secret location in Phnom Penh in 1963 to draw up a charter for a new party.<sup>12</sup> The leader of this junior group named Saloth Sar, alias Pol Pot, was elected the new general secretary of the KPRP. According to a veteran of the KPRP, upon assuming the position of general secretary in 1963, Pol Pot changed the name of the party from KPRP to the

“Communist Party of Kampuchea” (CPK) in an attempt to sever all connections with the ICP and the Vietnamese communists.<sup>13</sup> Many positions in the party were occupied by people close to Pol Pot.<sup>14</sup> People such as Keo Meas, who was a veteran of the KPRP and had close ties with the Vietnamese communists, did not hold any important post in the new party. Pol Pot changed the direction of the party and decided that armed insurrection was to be carried out in tandem with political action.<sup>15</sup> To the dismay of his North Vietnamese comrades, this new policy meant that henceforth, the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk’s regime was on the Cambodian communist’s political agenda.

While the communist movement in Cambodia undertook a revolutionary metamorphosis and secretly became the CPK, North Vietnam either did not know of, or paid little attention to, these developments. After all, it was already comfortable with the support it received from Prince Sihanouk. However, North Vietnam would soon come to regret this decision as the CPK shifted the policy towards the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk, thus driving a wedge between the Prince and North Vietnam.

### **2.3 Cambodia leaned right: policy shift towards the US**

The implicit understanding between North Vietnam and Prince Sihanouk seemed to be that the Vietnamese revolutionaries could have free access along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border as long as they did not present any threat to the Prince’s regime. However, that changed on 2 April 1968 when a violent revolt took place in Battambang province (northwestern part of Cambodia, cf. Map 2.1). The event started out as a local rebellion by farmers who had no connection whatsoever with the Cambodian communist insurgents. Responding to the abuse of power by local officials, farmers in a village called Samlaut attacked a military outpost, killing two soldiers and capturing many weapons.<sup>16</sup> Pol Pot and his comrades took advantage of this situation and declared responsibility for leading the revolt in Samlaut, essentially an attempt to hijack the event and use it as a publicity stunt for his movement.<sup>17</sup>

The Cambodian military responded to the revolt by attacking the villagers and burning houses, forcing hundreds or even thousands of farmers to flee into the nearby jungle and mountains. Prince Sihanouk received a detailed report on what had happened. As a result, he dismissed many local officials and forced his Prime Minister to resign.<sup>18</sup> However, Prince Sihanouk simply could not ignore the fact that the communists claimed responsibility for leading the revolt. That suspicion was confirmed when, after Samlaut, revolts in other areas became more widespread.<sup>19</sup> In the context of these simultaneous revolts, in addition to reports from some local authorities who had all the motivation to spin the information so that it would point the blame at others, Prince Sihanouk began to blame the communists for inciting the revolts.<sup>20</sup>

This caused a significant foreign policy shift. Prince Sihanouk began to move away from supporting North Vietnam. Rhetoric against the communists

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increased, while the relations between Cambodia and the US started to improve. Cambodia and the US reestablished diplomatic relations on 11 June 1969, and in the last days of July, Cambodia sent a letter inviting President Nixon for an official visit to Cambodia. The government also imposed strict controls over the press to avoid antagonizing the US.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Prince Sihanouk authorized the Cambodian military to take actions against the Vietnamese revolutionaries along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border.<sup>22</sup>

North Vietnam, of course, could not be indifferent about these disturbing developments, because the loss of sanctuaries in Cambodia would prove disastrous for its campaigns in South Vietnam. On 5 July 1969, Huynh Tan Phat, Prime Minister of the newly formed, underground revolutionary government with links to North Vietnam, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, paid an official visit to Cambodia to conclude some economic and trade agreements. The main objective of the visit was an attempt to observe the situation and to defuse the tensions resulting from these recent developments. However, the attempt failed when Prince Sihanouk publicly denounced the Vietnamese communists after the visit.<sup>23</sup>

As the specter of a complete strategic reversal loomed large, North Vietnam began to look to the remnants of the Cambodian communist party, which was now controlled by the largely unknown Pol Pot, in an attempt



Map 2.1 Map of Cambodia.

Source: author.

to find former allies for support.<sup>24</sup> Because Hanoi had no idea who Pol Pot was, it was faced with a dilemma: create a new, malleable Cambodian communist party to undermine Pol Pot and his CPK, thus further weakening the communist movement in Cambodia, or provide support, however temporary, to Pol Pot, at least until victory over the regime in South Vietnam was assured.<sup>25</sup> Hanoi chose the second alternative.

## **2.4 Full-scale war: the coup of 1970**

On 18 March 1970, when Prince Sihanouk was on an official visit abroad, the right-wing politicians and the military carried out a coup to depose the Prince. On that day, the legislature voted, under duress, to remove Prince Sihanouk from power. The National Assembly made this decision behind closed doors while paratroopers took up positions around the National Assembly.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, the Khmer Republic was proclaimed.

The coup cut short the official visit of Prince Sihanouk in Moscow. Prince Sihanouk then flew to Beijing where he held a secret meeting on 21 March 1970 with Pham Van Dong (North Vietnamese Premier) and Zhou Enlai (Premier of the People's Republic of China).<sup>27</sup> On 23 March, Prince Sihanouk broadcast a message from Beijing calling for his “children” (i.e. the Cambodian population) to go to the jungle and join the Maquis (a French term originated from World War II denoting resistance movement).

The coup in 1970 was unprecedented and provided a unique if somewhat ironic opportunity for Pol Pot. To be able to return to power, Prince Sihanouk had no choice but to rely on the communist Khmer Rouge. This enabled the Khmer Rouge to exploit Prince Sihanouk's reputation to attract recruits and build its power base. The coup of 1970 effectively made the Khmer Rouge leaders the servants of Prince Sihanouk, while it positioned them for the future since it controlled the forces in the field. In addition, the Cambodian communists received military aid from both China and North Vietnam while their enemy, the Khmer Republic, received less and less aid from the departing American troops.

The Khmer new year of 1975 marked the final offensive on Phnom Penh. On 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took the capital city. Their first step was the evacuation of the city.<sup>28</sup> The evacuation marked the beginning of Pol Pot's paranoid and bloody reign. He believed that the “enemies of the revolution” were still hiding in the city, waiting to bring down the revolution after the war.<sup>29</sup> He believed the evacuation would disrupt these internal enemies before they could act.

## **2.5 Democratic Kampuchea: Cambodia's dark age**

Upon taking over, the Khmer Rouge established a new government called “Democratic Kampuchea.” This new government made a series of decisions that eventually led to its own demise. First of all, the Khmer Rouge turned

against Prince Sihanouk since the support for Prince Sihanouk among the Cambodian people was still strong. Second, Pol Pot never felt safe from foreign intrigues. For him, the threat of a Vietnamese takeover was still a distinct possibility. To deal with these problems, he had to eliminate all enemies, internal and external. The external enemy was Vietnam and the internal enemy included those who had any relations with Vietnam and who planned to destroy the revolution from the inside.

### ***2.5.1 Prince Sihanouk: much vanity but no power***

At the outset, the Khmer Rouge leaders sought to undermine Prince Sihanouk, who was seen as a liability and not trustworthy. In July 1975, the Khmer Rouge requested the return of Prince Sihanouk from China. Upon his return, Prince Sihanouk was immediately appointed as head of state of Democratic Kampuchea and even presided over a cabinet meeting.<sup>30</sup> However, just like the cabinet meeting that the Prince presided over, the title of head of state was nominal only. A few weeks later, Prince Sihanouk was forced to go to the United States to petition the United Nations where he successfully reclaimed the Cambodian seat for Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>31</sup> Not long after he returned to Cambodia, his requests to go to the countryside to meet his compatriots were repeatedly denied, and Prince Sihanouk finally decided to submit a request for resignation in 1976.<sup>32</sup>

In an internal meeting in March 1976, the Standing Committee of the CPK accepted the Prince's resignation. The Khmer Rouge leaders never trusted Prince Sihanouk, and they feared that, due to the Prince's immense popularity among the Cambodian populace (the Khmer Rouge cadres included), any contact between the Prince and the people would undermine their power. Prince Sihanouk survived under Democratic Kampuchea only because of the intervention of China. Nayan Chanda wrote that Mao Tsetung understood that when Pol Pot took power, he would no longer need Prince Sihanouk and perhaps might even try to harm the Prince. Fearing this eventuality, the ailing Mao struggled with his failing health to speak to the sister-in-law of Pol Pot and told her not to send Prince Sihanouk and his wife to the cooperative (i.e. hard labor).<sup>33</sup> This proved to be a lifesaver for the Prince and his family. After his resignation, Prince Sihanouk was held prisoner in his own palace, with no contact with the outside world, until January 1979 when Democratic Kampuchea collapsed.

### ***2.5.2 Disaster of the Four-Year Plan (1977–1980)***

The Khmer Rouge's second major strategy was to reaffirm the collectivization of private property to maximize rice production. In early 1976, a Four-Year Plan (1977–1980) was announced. The Khmer Rouge divided the land into two categories. Normal land was required to produce three tons of rice per hectare (approximately 2.47 acres), while the best quality land

was required to produce at least four to seven tons per hectare. It was this policy that led to famine and the brutal killing of people who were deemed enemies of the state because they could not meet the production target.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from this simplified system, the Khmer Rouge also established the “cooperatives” system, which was a collectivization of land and private property. The cooperative was a production unit that could cover many hamlets and villages, depending on the scale of the rice fields and the number of workers. The Khmer Rouge abolished the market system and replaced it with this cooperative system. The cooperative was the place where people worked for subsistence. The chief of the cooperative determined the daily food ration for everyone under his control, and the cooperative was the only place where eating was allowed. Anyone caught eating outside of the cooperatives would be considered a traitor to the party and the revolution. The offender would be arrested and executed. Thus, the chiefs of the cooperatives had the authority to kill anyone they deemed “unnecessary” to the revolution. There was no law under Democratic Kampuchea. Justice rested on the will and the mood of the cadres.

The Four-Year Plan collapsed almost as soon as it was implemented and that was the genesis of the genocide.<sup>35</sup> The Four-Year Plan had three drastic consequences. First of all, it generated a famine. Second, as the laborers, weakened by malnutrition, could not work to raise production, they were either considered lazy or enemies of the revolution. Both of these offenses could easily lead to execution. Third, Pol Pot feared that the failure to meet targets must have been the conspiracy of internal enemies who plotted to overthrow the revolution. This led to many waves of purges, which devastated not only the ordinary people but also the Khmer Rouge cadres themselves.

### *2.5.3 Comrades at war: Vietnam’s southern march must be stopped!*

The very first clash between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam occurred on 1 May 1975 when a battalion of the Khmer Rouge’s 164th Division invaded an island south of the Cambodian coast that was claimed by both Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>36</sup> The attack was a debacle. Nevertheless, Vietnam did not take any large-scale retaliation for the event and still maintained diplomatic relations with Democratic Kampuchea. Perhaps still convinced that the Khmer Rouge was subscribing to the idea of world socialist revolutionary solidarity and the history of joint struggle, Vietnam did not take any major actions that might exacerbate the problem. However, the debacle following the invasion of the jointly claimed island only put a temporary halt to Pol Pot’s anti-Vietnamese policy, and it took him just one year to organize another army to fight with Vietnam on a larger scale.

In spite of the disparity in the number of men under arms in Vietnam and Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge did not hesitate to pursue an adventurous policy

against Vietnam, because it believed its own propaganda that it had defeated the US in 1975. In this logic, war with Vietnam should go like clockwork. How the Khmer Rouge planned to overcome the Vietnamese numerical superiority can be discerned from a state radio broadcast on 10 May 1978. In this broadcast, the Khmer Rouge propaganda service briefed the nation about national defense situation between April 1977 and April 1978:

[W]e are few in number, but we have to attack a larger force; therefore, we must preserve our forces to the maximum and try to kill as many of the enemy as possible. . . . In terms of numbers, one of us must kill 30 Vietnamese. If we can implement this slogan, we shall certainly win. . . . So far, we have succeeded in implementing this slogan of 1 against 30; that is to say, we lose 1 against 30 Vietnamese. . . . We should have 2,000,000 troops for 60,000,000 Vietnamese. However 2,000,000 troops would be more than enough to fight the Vietnamese, because Vietnam has only 50,000,000 inhabitants. . . . We must use one against 30. This is just the number fixed by the Party, but in concrete, deeds of some of our comrades fought 1 against 10; we shall certainly win with 1 against 10 or 1 against 5. Some of our people have fought 1 against 20, and some have even tried to fight one against 50 or 1 against 100. There was no problem; they were still victorious.<sup>37</sup>

The mathematics were simplistic, if not totally absurd. However, not long after the above broadcast, military campaigns by the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam restarted.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge never ceased finding and eliminating suspected internal enemies. Suspects were arrested, tortured, and then forced to make new lists of suspects, which led to more purges. This purification policy destroyed the cadres of Democratic Kampuchea to a point where even the Chinese technicians who were sent to help the regime complained about the too frequent disappearances of their Cambodian counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

Between 1976 and 1977, small-scale clashes between Khmer Rouge troops and Vietnamese troops along the border were very frequent. Both sides exchanged diplomatic correspondence as well as meeting frequently to try to resolve the conflict. However, most of those sessions tended to degenerate into mutual accusations and nothing peaceful came out of those meetings. Finally, on 24 September 1977, the Khmer Rouge launched a furious, and perhaps the most brutal attack of the war, on Tay Ninh province, killing hundreds of Vietnamese civilians.<sup>40</sup> Focused on domestic reconstruction, the Vietnamese still pursued negotiation.

On the ground, however, the Vietnamese were less lenient than in previous small skirmishes and retaliated on a large scale. The Vietnamese seemed to have sensed that a non-response would be interpreted as weakness, even though at the same time, the Vietnamese felt the need to leave the channel for negotiation open. The Khmer Rouge ignored the call for negotiation.

On 6 December 1977, the Vietnamese conducted a coordinated counter-attack with brutal efficiency and completely stunned the Khmer Rouge. One can gauge the severity of the situation by looking at one of the Khmer Rouge's telegrams from the battlefield. On 23 December, one Khmer Rouge commander, comrade Phourng, noted that the Vietnamese moved in very quietly and achieved surprise in many places.<sup>41</sup> Just fifteen minutes after the first telegram, Phourng relayed another message. The situation was getting worse:

For the Yuon [i.e. Vietnamese] situation on the 22nd of December 1977, they pushed forward to capture the Krek rubber plantation in its entirety . . . We lost contact with the rubber plantation and factory at Memot because the courier has not yet returned . . . This Yuon force, according to [our] soldiers, consisted of many trucks and many tanks. The fighting occurred against our forces chaotically, in front and in the rear of our artillery positions, and we could not discern which side was ours and which side was the enemy's. According to my own analysis, we have lost control to a great extent, we lost communication between the troops and the command headquarters; and that was why the enemy could penetrate this deep with ease.<sup>42</sup>

The Vietnamese army had moved in with only armor and motorized infantry. That was the reason why they could achieve breakthrough this easily. This was a classic blitzkrieg tactic. The Khmer Rouge operations probably ended in late December 1977. The following report reveals a total loss of control:

We have a hole in the middle with no large formation of troops. The rubber plantation's militias could not fight and the big formations went to fight at the border for a long time and were now losing control and as we know, our brothers in the big formations were routed and could not yet establish communication.<sup>43</sup>

In late December 1977, Democratic Kampuchea publicly announced the armed clashes with Vietnam to the world, as well as the fact that that it had broken off diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Vietnam unilaterally withdrew all of its forces from Cambodia despite gaining territory during the fight.<sup>44</sup> As late as 1977, it seemed Vietnam still had not been prepared to undertake anything drastic because it was not able to conceive a political strategy yet.

Defeat on the battlefield was not the main problem for the Khmer Rouge, however. It was the new wave of purges that destroyed the regime. By simply looking at the reports that were coming in, one can see that the Vietnamese could easily penetrate the rear of the formations and effectively disrupt the Khmer Rouge supplies and artillery support. Once that occurred, the front formations collapsed. One can easily see that the Vietnamese triumphed

because of correct tactics, i.e. a blitzkrieg-type tactic. In the mind of the Khmer Rouge leaders, however, when campaigns initially ran so well and then immediately and inexplicably collapsed, this could only mean one thing: internal treachery that was perpetrated by Vietnamese sympathizers. Predictably, Pol Pot went out to destroy the internal enemies.

## 2.6 Kampuchea Solidarity Front for National Salvation: birth of a revolution

### 2.6.1 *The East Zone put to the sword*

In June 1977, when the Khmer Rouge was at war with Vietnam, internally, the purges of the cadres in an area along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, called the East Zone (a Zone was an administrative unit consisting of several provinces), was also under way. A junior Khmer Rouge commander in the East Zone named Hun Sen escaped to Vietnam after learning that his name was next on the execution list.<sup>45</sup> He also wanted to seek support from Vietnam in order to return to Cambodia and defeat the Khmer Rouge.<sup>46</sup> On 27 September, Hun Sen was allowed to meet with Lieutenant General Van Tien Dung, a member of the Politburo of the Vietnamese communist party, who was also the chief of staff of the PAVN.<sup>47</sup> At the end of the meeting, however, no explicit pledge for support was given to Hun Sen.<sup>48</sup> It seemed that as late as 1977, Vietnam still maintained some hope of negotiating with the Khmer Rouge. Perhaps that was the reason why Vietnam did not give any political or military support to the Cambodian refugees who had escaped to Vietnam.

For the Khmer Rouge, the year 1978 was eventful. It marked a much larger Khmer Rouge offensive against the Vietnamese. The most brutal attack of the war was launched in late February 1978 by the Southwest Zone and the divisions from the Central Committee of the CPK. According to one report, the second wave consisted of around 30,000 to 40,000 troops and was aimed at the Vietnamese Tay Ninh province.<sup>49</sup> However, just like in 1977, the Khmer Rouge campaign in 1978 was a total disaster.

In April 1978, the PAVN responded in kind with a multidivisional counter-attack. Unlike in 1977, the Vietnamese now used tanks in greater numbers, as well as air support.<sup>50</sup> Khmer Rouge battlefield reports also revealed another important aspect of tactics used by the PAVN. In 1977, the Vietnamese moved swiftly with armor and motorized infantry to penetrate behind the Khmer Rouge lines, avoided strong points, and induced confusion and collapse of the main forward formations of the Khmer Rouge. In 1978, however, the Vietnamese pushed forward more slowly. While the Vietnamese counter-attack in 1977 had been a blitzkrieg tactic, the counter-attack in 1978 was purely attritional. Perhaps, Vietnam wanted to weaken the Khmer Rouge as much as possible before involving the Khmer resistance groups organized from the refugees who had escaped to Vietnam.

In April 1978, at the same time that the war reached its climax, Colonel General Tran Van Tra, the commander and chief political commissar of Vietnam's Military Region 7, told Hun Sen that the Vietnamese leadership had already agreed to provide support for a Cambodian resistance movement.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, an armed force, the "Kampuchean Solidarity Armed Forces for National Salvation," was established on 12 May 1978. Eventually, by recruiting the Cambodian refugees who escaped to Vietnam, the resistance movement had twenty-one infantry battalions, one all-female battalion, and one hundred armed operations groups, while the units of the headquarters consisted of a general staff section, a political section, a logistics section, a finance section, one special forces company, one medical company, and one unit for military bands.<sup>52</sup> These forces operated out of the refugee camps in Vietnam's Long Giao province. These "Long Giao battalions" were the genesis units of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army, one of the four factions to the war after 1979 (see Chapter 4).

On 22 November 1978, the Cambodian resistance army (Kampuchean Solidarity Armed Forces for National Salvation) began drafting a political program to create a political movement.<sup>53</sup> The political movement was formally established in Kratie province on 2 December 1978.<sup>54</sup> On Christmas day 1978, the Cambodian resistance army and the Vietnamese army combined forces for a final push into Cambodia to overthrow Democratic Kampuchea on 7 January 1979, ending the Khmer Rouge's genocidal regime that had lasted for 3 years 8 months and 20 days.

### *2.6.2 Prince Sihanouk became useful to the Khmer Rouge once more: adding one more insult to injury*

While the war on the border was raging, Prince Sihanouk was still kept in almost solitary confinement by Pol Pot. Nonetheless, in late 1978, Prince Sihanouk noted an unusual generosity and kindness on the part of the regime.<sup>55</sup> At dusk on 5 January 1979, a senior Khmer Rouge leader came to the house and told Prince Sihanouk that Pol Pot had invited the Prince for evening tea.<sup>56</sup> Prince Sihanouk's relatives and the queen were worried that the invitation was the last one from the Khmer Rouge and that they would never see Prince Sihanouk again. But the Prince's star was still shining: Pol Pot needed the Prince more than anything. Upon arrival at Pol Pot's residence, Prince Sihanouk noted that Pol Pot was more courteous than ever before, prostrating himself to welcome the Prince, a standard Cambodian etiquette of respect for senior people and the royal family, something Pol Pot had never done before.<sup>57</sup> He also addressed Prince Sihanouk as "His Majesty." Pol Pot dropped a hint about what he wanted Prince Sihanouk to do:

Comrade Khieu Samphan that Your Majesty had met before had told me that Your Majesty would be happy to represent our government at



*Figure 2.1* The soldiers of the Kampuchea Solidarity Front for National Salvation approached the Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, on 7 January 1979, the day considered to be the national liberation day.

Source: SPK.

the United Nations and defend the righteous cause of our people against invasion by the Yuon, in the (political) discussions that might take place in the Security Council . . . of the United Nations. Your Majesty is a nationalist and Your Majesty has many friends in the world. Your Majesty could be of great advantage to the Cambodian people.<sup>58</sup>

Pol Pot then briefed Prince Sihanouk that the Vietnamese would soon capture Phnom Penh, but reassured the prince that it would not be a problem, as the Cambodian soldiers and people would soon chase the Vietnamese out.<sup>59</sup> Ieng Sary and Pol Pot then carried out a “good cop, bad cop” routine to try to convince Prince Sihanouk of their sincerity. In Prince Sihanouk’s account, Ieng Sary said that only the Prince can go but the queen and the Prince’s relatives must stay behind.<sup>60</sup> But Pol Pot countermanded Ieng Sary and ordered him to make sure Prince Sihanouk and his entire entourage could leave Phnom Penh on the same flight.

Pol Pot then gave Prince Sihanouk \$20,000 as pocket money for the mission, the money that the Prince returned in full after departing Democratic Kampuchea. In retrospect, we can see that the Prince had no choice but to agree. It was either take the money and leave, or perish under the Khmer Rouge for non-compliance. Vietnam sent a special forces detachment to rescue Prince Sihanouk so that the new regime could gain legitimacy through the Prince’s popularity, but this operation failed.<sup>61</sup> Prince Sihanouk had already left the Royal Palace the day before.

## Notes

- 1 Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, 30.
- 2 This issue is controversial and politically charged. However, the perception of many Cambodians during the war was that the land belongs to Cambodia and its loss was simply another example of Vietnamese expansionism. On the bitter relations between Vietnam and Cambodia prior to the 1970s, see Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*; Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*; and Meyer, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer*, 68.
- 3 Mark W. McLeod, “Indigenous Peoples and the Vietnamese Revolution, 1930–1975,” *Journal of World History* 10, no. 2 (1999): 355.
- 4 Dmitry Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives,” *Searching for the Truth*, May 2001.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Kenton Clymer, “The Perils of Neutrality,” *Searching for the Truth*, Janaury 2000.
- 7 Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 49.
- 8 Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and Wilfred Burchett, *My War with the CIA: The Memoirs of Prince Norodom Sihanouk* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1973), 175–180.
- 9 Clymer, “The Perils of Neutrality.” Clymer speculated that the delay between the time of the failed coup attempt (1959) and the cessation of the diplomatic relations (1965) was perhaps due to the reliance of the Cambodian economy

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on the inflow of American dollar. This factor, according to Clymer, explained Prince Sihanouk's hesitation.

10 Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 9. Ironically, this insistence ran against the Vietnamese concept of “đấu tranh” (Vietnamese for “the struggle”), which blended political and military actions as well as combining guerrilla warfare with conventional warfare. For a detailed description, see chapter 9 of Pike, *The PAVN*, 212–232. The fact that the Vietnamese communists applied *đấu tranh* in Vietnam but told their Cambodian comrades not to do the same in Cambodia was perhaps evidence that the Vietnamese communists did not want their Cambodian comrade to win.

11 Dmitry Mosyakov claimed that as a direct result of this defection, the KPRP party secretary disappeared and was presumed dead. See Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists.”

12 David Chandler, “Revising the Past in Democratic Kampuchea: When was the Birthday of the Party? Notes and comments,” *Pacific Affairs* 56, no. 2 (1983): 288–300. Mosyakov, on the other hand, concurred on the new charter but did not mention the name.

13 Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists.”

14 Ibid.

15 Interviews with Nuon Chea in 2005, presented as Annex in ីប សុផល [Diep, Sophal], សាកនាគកម្មកម្មណី មនាគមនីភូជានយាយ បង្កើតកិនសង្គម និង សង្គរភាគបង្កូលយាយ [Cambodia’s Tragedy: Political Ideology, Social Revolution, and Bloody War] (បេរិចបេរិចពេញ កងកុម្ភុមជាតិយៈ ធនាគារ ២០០៨ [Phnom Penh: Tchouk Jey Publishing, 2008]).

16 Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, 113.

17 Ibid., 114.

18 Meyer, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer*, 58.

19 Ibid., 57. According to Meyer, just like the revolt in Samlot, other revolts in many parts of the country were genuine farmers’ revolts against local officials. But the communists once again claimed they had led the revolts.

20 Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 13.

21 Ibid., 15.

22 The operation was dubbed “Operation TEST VC/NVA.” Its objective was to test the strength of the Vietnamese communists along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border and, if necessary, to destroy them. See Sak Sutsakhan, *The Khmer Republic at War and Its Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 63–66.

23 Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 187.

24 Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists.”

25 Ibid.

26 Martin, *Shattered Society*, 124.

27 Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 65–67.

28 Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 103–105.

29 Ibid.

30 Dy Khamboly, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979)* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007), 19.

31 Ibid.

32 Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, 185–189.

33 Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 43.

34 By 1975, most of the arable land had been ravaged by bombing and unexploded ordnance, as well as landmines. Moreover, the ones who had to work to achieve the goals of the Four-Year Plan were former city residents with little to no experience with agricultural labor. The Khmer Rouge distinguished between the

“Old People” or “Base/Local People” and the “New People,” or “17 April People.” The former were considered as the owners of the country, while the latter were considered as “latecomers” to the revolution. This latter group were “sub-people” and could only obtain the status of full-fledged citizens by way of forced labor.

- 35 Three main reasons could explain why this Four-Year Plan failed. First, the people who were sent to the cooperative came from the cities and were not accustomed to either hard labor or even agricultural practices in general. Second, because the Khmer Rouge did not have any machinery to help with the cultivation, the productivity was dismal. Third, most arable land was ravaged by war and unexploded ordnance and landmines prevented a large-scale cultivation. See Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 53.
- 36 Sok Vannak, “Koh Tral Under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Rasmei Kampuchea Daily*, 26 August 2012.
- 37 A Khmer Rouge radio broadcast in 1978, Documentation Center of Cambodia’s collections, quoted in Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 91.
- 38 Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 75–77.
- 39 Andrew Mertha, “Surrealpolitik: The Experience of Chinese Experts in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–1979,” *Cross-Current: East Asian History and Culture Review*, No. 4 (September 2012). Accessed 15 October 2013, <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-4/Mertha>.
- 40 Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 99.
- 41 “Telegram 07,” 23 December 1977 (19:30), Document number: D01975, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).
- 42 The term “yuon” was a Khmer term denoting Vietnamese. In the 1960s, however, with the rise of the Khmer Rouge, this term began to contain racial pejorative. When this term is used today, it tends to have a heavy derogatory meaning. See “Telegram 06,” 23 December 1977 (19:45), Document number: D01972, DC-Cam. This telegram was sent later than the previous one but was received by Office 870 one day earlier. That is the reason why this one was marked “Telegram 06.”
- 43 “Telegram 08, Dear Respected and Beloved Office 870, from Phourng,” 24 December 1977, Document number: D01974, DC-Cam.
- 44 According to Stephen Morris, the reason that Vietnam did not follow through with its campaign was that it saw no exit strategy, i.e. no political solution after the military action. See Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*.
- 45 Harish and Julie Mehta, *Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1999), 209–210.
- 46 For one man to seek support from a country to attack another country was indeed a very ambitious plan. However, Hun Sen speculated that the intensity of the war and the severity of Khmer Rouge’s atrocities made such a plan possible. Moreover, Hun Sen was among the very first Cambodian refugees who escaped to Vietnam. These people were the only source of information from which Vietnam learnt about the general situation and the genocide inside Cambodia. Consequently, the first group of refugees had close contacts with the Vietnamese. They were, therefore, in a good position to request support from Vietnam. The claim was made by Hun Sen, “Commemoration ceremony of fallen veterans and the inauguration of the historical Memory Statue at the former location of Unit 125 [Dong Nai province, Vietnam], the source of the armed forces of Cambodia under the command of comrade Hun Sen,” aired on 2 January 2012 on the National Television of Kampuchea (TVK).
- 47 Ibid. Dung was the commander of the PAVN that defeated South Vietnam in the Spring Offensive of 1975.

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48 Ibid.

49 Editorial staff, “Le Cambodge Aurait Lancé une Offensive Dans la Province Vietnamienne de Tay Ninh,” *Le Monde*, 26–27 February 1978. The newspaper mentioned that the number was given by a “reliable source” to a representative of AFP.

50 Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 208–210.

51 Hun Sen, “Commemoration Ceremony of Fallen Veterans.”

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid. The peculiarity of this case was that the army was established before the political movement. Thus, the Kampuchean Solidarity “Armed Forces” for National Salvation was born before the Kampuchean Solidarity “Front” for National Salvation.

54 Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 339.

55 Prince Norodom Sihanouk, *Prisoniers des Khmers Rouges* (Paris: Hachette: 1986), 331–332.

56 Ibid., 356.

57 Ibid., 357.

58 Ibid., 358–359.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 359–363.

61 Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 299. According to Chanda, one team of Vietnamese special forces was sent in after the Prince had already been evacuated out of the country by the Khmer Rouge. Chanda claimed the team was decimated. However, the author’s conversation with a relative of a Vietnamese soldier involved in the operation revealed that before the combat team went in, a forward, light, reconnaissance team had already been in to scout the approach. This team survived but lacked the capabilities to change the situation.

### 3 The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea

The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend

In the Cambodian Civil War, the *de facto* government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was supported by Vietnam and fought against an exiled government, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which was in fact a grand coalition of three resistance movements. The first group was the Khmer Rouge who retained its former name, Democratic Kampuchea. It called its armed wing the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK) or simply, the "National Army." The second group was Prince Sihanouk's resistance movement, the *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifiques Et Coopérative* (in English, the National United Front for a Cambodia that is Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative), mostly known by its French acronym, the FUNCINPEC. Prince Sihanouk also organized the armed wing of this movement called the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste* (ANS), a testament of his distrust of the Khmer Rouge, following the bitter memories of the 1970s. Lastly, fearful of Vietnamese expansion to the southeast of its border, Thailand helped organize a resistance group called the Kampuchean People's National Liberation Front, or KPNLF with its armed wing, the Kampuchean People's National Liberation Armed Forces (KPNLAF). This chapter discusses the military organization of all three parties belonging to the CGDK. The PRK will be discussed in Chapter 4.

#### 3.1 The Khmer Rouge: from guerrillas to regulars, from regulars to guerrillas

The Khmer Rouge began as outlawed guerrillas. The 1970 coup created the conditions under which the Khmer Rouge became a liberation army claiming as its mission, the return of Prince Sihanouk to power. Members of the Khmer Rouge came into the hamlets and villages and started recruiting peasants who supported Prince Sihanouk.<sup>1</sup> The organization at that time was designed and based on Chinese and Vietnamese guerilla units. They were organized as "armed propaganda units," meaning that they had a dual mission—to indoctrinate people about their cause, while retaining the ability to fight, should the situation demand it. These "educators" required little

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training, as their mission consisted of going from village to village, singing revolutionary songs and spreading propaganda in order to help recruit the local population.<sup>2</sup>

After the eventual Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975, the Kampuchea Revolutionary Army was established in Phnom Penh on 22 July 1975.<sup>3</sup> This army had three layers. The first layer was the conventional units that were directly controlled by the Central Committee. In March 1977, this army had nine divisions: 703, 310, 450, 170, 290, 502, 801, 920, and 164.<sup>4</sup> A division had between four thousand and six thousand soldiers. Each of these divisions had a unique three-digit numerical designation, which distinguished them as troops of the Central Committee.<sup>5</sup>

The second layer of military power of Democratic Kampuchea was at the regional level. Both the Region (province) and Zone (several provinces) had their own military units. The Zone could organize only one division or brigade to carry out operations in its area of responsibility. The Region typically had one regiment.<sup>6</sup>

The third layer was the village militia. The total number of both the regional troops and militias was not clear, because the archives are incomplete. Moreover, after sensing an impending purge, some units in the East Zone were upgraded beyond the standard allowance.<sup>7</sup> Only the total number of the troops under the nine divisions was clear. In sum, a shadow of this three-echelon force more or less perpetuated after 1979, albeit on a smaller scale.

### *3.1.1 The post-1979 reorganization: strategic and operational doctrine*

January 1979. Originally designed as a guerrilla army, and was still primarily fighting as such, the Khmer Rouge was no match for the PAVN on the open battlefield. Many divisions were routed. Yet, as a guerrilla army, such routs were not a serious issue. After all, one simply could not rout an army that used to fight as guerilla units, where the best unit was the squad. Thus, the divisions that were routed in 1979 in the East Zone immediately reorganized themselves into a de facto, division-size, mechanized task force and began to fight a brutal retrograde operation to withdraw to the Cambodian-Thai border, some three hundred kilometers away.

“But how did you get the tanks to move that far, considering the severe state you were in?” the author asked, instinctively. “We actually improvised along the way” the commander replied as he struggled to remember a point that was almost overlooked.

As the PAVN’s blitzkrieg spearhead surged forward toward Siem Reap province, the supply convoy struggled to keep up. The PAVN then met the Khmer Rouge task force at the head of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Khmer Rouge task force defeated the PAVN logistics guard in details. As a logistics element in a blitzkrieg war, the PAVN convoy contained both fuel and

ammunition for the tanks. These tanks were the same T-54, or T-55 used by both sides. The captured supplies were enough for the Khmer Rouge task force to fight one operation in its own right. The Khmer Rouge task force no longer remained a force fighting a retrograde operation, but a genuine threat to the PAVN rear.

“Oh now I see, that was why my unit (a Khmer unit fighting alongside the PAVN) was ordered back from Pursat to the rear, to guard the supply routes at that time because we heard there was a major attack at the rear!” exclaimed a former KPRA soldier, thus seemingly confirming the account of the former Khmer Rouge commander.

But the commander still knew there were some battles he should not contest. Instead of transitioning into attack, he continued the retrograde operation until the task force reached its objective in the safety of the Cardamom Mountains range in Pursat province. He lost all the tanks along the way due to mechanical problems, but almost all of the entire task force survived the ordeal. The task force then gave birth to three divisions that operated in the area until 1991. He spoke proudly of the operation. “We were on par with the Vietnamese. They dealt us a blow, we dealt them a blow. A punch came, a punch was returned.” As events would later show, the commander did not exaggerate. The Khmer Rouge had started their guerrilla campaign in earnest.

The Khmer Rouge divisions were very different from those of the other factions. They adhered to the “People’s War” concept of war and cemented their military organization with the local population, either through selective intimidation or ideology or both. Thus, while the Khmer Rouge divisions might have had a substantially smaller number of troops than those of other factions, all of them were maneuver units, while logistics and sustainment support were conducted by the local civilian population, or the separate, all-female units. The units of the other factions would include support elements (logistics and sustainment) in their order of battle.

Officially, the Khmer Rouge army was known as the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK), a shadow of Democratic Kampuchea, which still held a seat at the UN. Yet, the soldiers in the field shied away from using this name, which was associated with the murderous period between 1975 and 1979. Surprisingly, this army functioned without official name or rank. Perhaps, their hatred of the Vietnamese transcended these basic ancillaries.

In the post-1979 reorganization, each NADK division had between three or four regiments but had no heavy (long-range) artillery. Each regiment had three or four battalions. Each battalion, however, controlled only two to three squads.<sup>8</sup> Thus, each NADK battalion would have had only between 30 and 40 soldiers, each regiment between 70 and 80 soldiers, and each division between 300 and 400 soldiers. In other words, an NADK division functioned as an equivalent of a KPRA’s augmented battalion. During the war, whenever the Khmer Rouge mobilized to attack a large objective, it

Table 3.1 Unit size conversion

KPRA's echelons (average number of personnel)	<i>Khmer Rouge</i> (NADK)	KPNLAF	ANS
Battalion (200–300)	Regiment	Regiment	Regiment
Regiment (300–500)	Division (except some special divisions)	Brigade	Brigade
Brigade (1500–2000)	Special regiments	OMZ	Division
Division (3000–4000)	980th, 920th, 450th, and 415th Divisions		
Division-plus (7000) or Corps	Front		

almost never committed less than one division. The inflated organization gave the Khmer Rouge around forty nominal divisions, manned by only about thirty thousand troops.<sup>9</sup>

There were a few exceptions to this rule. Benefiting from the sanctuaries along the Cambodian-Thai border and the ability to retreat to Thailand in times of duress, most divisions that operated around the Khmer Rouge headquarters were full and heavy divisions. Four divisions were the most prominent. The 415th Division, operating around Route 10 near Pailin in Battambang province, and the 450th Division, operating in Malai, the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, each had strength similar to that of a KPRA division.<sup>10</sup> The 980th and 920th Divisions in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey also had similar strength.<sup>11</sup> None of them had tanks until late 1989, after which they captured a few from the KPRA in Pailin. In 1990, the Khmer Rouge also received a number of tanks from China.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, there was no notable event during which they used tanks decisively. Pol Pot seemed to prefer holding them back to protect his headquarters.

At the strategic level, the Khmer Rouge adopted a “rusty iron” concept, which was protracted guerrilla warfare to wear down the enemy by attrition, and then defeat the enemy on the conventional battlefield.<sup>13</sup> This strategy should come as no surprise, since it had been applied with success against the Khmer Republic in the 1970s. In line with this strategy, at the operational level, the NADK’s concept was almost an exact copy of the People’s War playbook. In a rare display of self-confidence, the NADK Bulletin briefly revealed the Khmer Rouge’s operational concept, which consisted of five successive steps. In the “five-target combat tactics,” the NADK sought to detect the weakest “Vietnamese hamlets” (in the Khmer Rouge’s parlance, this was the PRK-controlled hamlet), carrying out repeated attacks, carrying

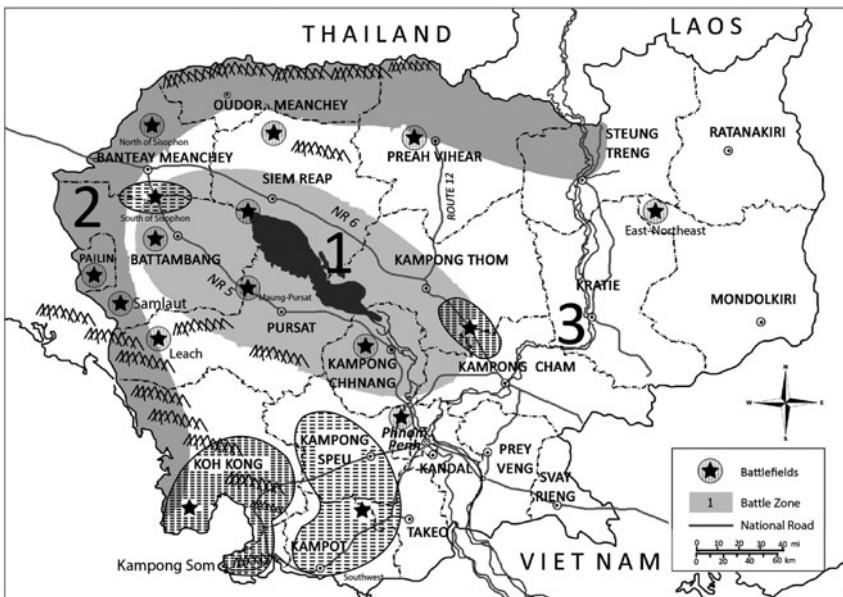
out mobile attacks, transforming the “Vietnamese temporarily controlled areas” into active guerrilla zones, and then turning these into guerrilla bases.<sup>14</sup>

In this Khmer Rouge concept, the ultimate objective was not one of attrition on the PRK’s manpower, nor was it merely interested in the body count of its enemy. On the contrary, controlling the hamlet and village administration was the key to success in the Khmer Rouge’s greater scheme of things. Once it gained control of these hamlets and villages, however temporary, propaganda efforts and civic actions were then carried out to try to eliminate the influence of the PRK’s local administration and its link with the local people. In addition to the five-target combat tactic, the NADK taught the people in the locales that it had occupied the “3 don’ts” movement that the people must adhere to: don’t sell the supplies (rice, fish, and other commodities) to the Yuon enemy (derogatory term for Vietnamese); don’t allow the Yuon enemy’s recruitment for the K-5 plan (cf. Chapter 4); and don’t allow the forced recruitment of soldiers by the Yuon enemy.<sup>15</sup>

To achieve these political goals and strategic objectives, the Khmer Rouge needed a capable army. Military-wise, the Khmer Rouge then divided their areas of operation into three “battle zones” (see Map 3.1): the first area in the surrounds of the Tonle Sap Lake (because of its economic potential), the second area along the Cambodian-Thai border (due to its infiltration potential), and the third area covered the rest of the country (to fix the KPRA forces).<sup>16</sup> This strategic concept was not merely declaratory. The NADK actually allocated forces to fight in the three areas in accordance to the respective importance. As a result, Battle Zone 1 and 2 received the most forces while Battle Zone 3 did not have any major formation operating under its responsibility.

In the northwestern provinces, the NADK’s formation reached the level of “Front” (which is an equivalent to “corps” in the organization of Western countries). The NADK organized two Fronts, Front 909, which operated in the Battambang-Pursat border, and Front 250, which operated south of Sisophon (provincial capital of Banteay Meanchey), i.e. along the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey provinces.<sup>17</sup> These organizations were mainly used for command and control. The Khmer Rouge still lacked the capability of being able to mass and fight as a conventional army in the early years of the war.

Front 909 oversaw the operations of nine divisions, three of which were created from the former 502nd and 5th Divisions of Democratic Kampuchea. Front 250 controlled four heavy divisions and four special (augmented) regiments. By Cambodian standards, therefore, both were corps-size formations.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the Khmer Rouge did not rely solely on refugee camps for sanctuaries or manpower. Unlike the non-communist resistance, which we will examine next, the Khmer Rouge relied more on their underground networks in the villages all over the country. It was such an expansive network that allowed the NADK to operate in all of



Map 3.1 Khmer Rouge campaign map.

Source: author.

the battlefields and battle zones. In terms of matériels, the NADK was generously supplied by China.

At the operational level, the NADK also deployed its forces to specific “Battlefields,” which corresponded to the terrain with special local significance. These were the prioritized areas within a Battle Zone. For example, “Southern Sisophon Battlefield” lay at the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey province. Operating along the border between two provinces was a favorite Khmer Rouge tactic because any KPRA operation would have to be a coordinated operation between the two provinces. Such operations are, by nature, complicated and prone to failure due to the possibility for misunderstanding by both commands. Controlling this Battlefield would also allow the NADK to cut a stretch of National Road 5 to isolate Sisophon. The Southern Sisophon Battlefield was in the area of operations of Front 250.

Once again, just like the low priority of Battle Zone 3, the area to the east had only a few aggregated Battlefields and these were not supported by any major formation apart from several small divisions. This reinforces the point that Battle Zone 3 was a fixing force and was not a priority in the Khmer Rouge’s larger scheme. One major reason for this had something to do with logistics. As we talk about Fronts, operating in major battlefields and battle zones like this, logistics become very demanding. This is an area we will examine next.

### **3.1.2 Logistics**

No research has ever been undertaken in regard to the transportation and logistics units. Written archives are also very rare. The best sources of information that this book draws upon are the intelligence reports by the Khmer Rouge's enemy, the KPRA, and information from the NADK bi-monthly bulletin.

Logistics in this war is not something that one can observe in wars like World War II, where the United States and Soviet militaries lined up endless convoys of trucks to bring the matériels, fuel, and ammunition to the fighting units at the frontline. The war in Cambodia was an impoverished war where logistics were conducted by people, literally.

The Khmer Rouge continued its military tradition of the 1970s by using female warriors in the transportation units. The NADK bulletin fully grasped the importance of the logistics units and dedicated half of its very first issue to photos describing the heroism of the all-female transportation units.<sup>19</sup> The same dedication can be observed throughout subsequent issues.

The number of personnel in the transportation unit varied from unit to unit. Every unit included local people in its ranks to guide the path. In the NADK bulletin, in most photos of the transportation units, one can often discern a few females in civilian uniforms travelling with the NADK transporters who, in turn, sported olive green battle fatigues, courtesy of China's People's Liberation Army.<sup>20</sup> In all of the pictorial evidence related to the transportation units, none of them ever carried ammunition for small arms. The transporters always carried rocket-propelled grenade rounds, recoilless rifle rounds, and artillery rounds, especially the 107mm rockets, which could be used as a terror weapon when fired on urban centers.<sup>21</sup>

The NADK was committed to operate deep inside Cambodia to disabuse any notion that the PRK had staying power. To extend its operational reach, the NADK relied heavily upon hidden ammunition caches that would need to be hoarded in advance. This method had both advantages and disadvantages. The major advantage of this logistical concept was that it allowed the NADK to operate anywhere in Cambodia and with significant intensity. Also, because it was a hidden cache, the NADK would not have to worry about interdiction of supply columns by the enemy. The war then shifted to the intelligence arena where the "people-informants" were crucial for both the Khmer Rouge (keeping secrets) and the PRK (convincing the people to uncover the cache). With expansive networks in villages across the country, the Khmer Rouge did not find it difficult to keep the cache hidden until the time of attack.

The major disadvantage, however, was how to get the ammunitions from the Cambodian-Thai border to the particular cache near the site of attack in the first place. This was where the NADK's supply column could not entirely avoid the enemy's interdiction. Before the start of the dry and rainy seasons, the NADK would launch a series of small offensive operations to

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secure the paths that the logistics units needed to transport ammunition to the interior. Some of those operations could be sustained for months.<sup>22</sup> After the paths were secured and the ammunition transported, the NADK would then shift attention towards targets inside the country. Whether or not the PRK could stop such attacks depended largely on whether it could stop the supply of arms from the border. As a result, the fiercest battles were not the ones carried out in the villages or districts, but they were the PRK's interdiction of the NADK's supply columns. The success of such operations, in turn, depended on the political battles waged in the villages and districts.

The second major disadvantage of this logistics concept was the tyranny of distance. The further the NADK needed to transport the ammunition, the more ammunition it had to consume in the operations to open the paths for the transportation units. It was precisely because of this inherent problem that the NADK could not significantly extend its operational reach into Battle Zone 3. In turn, the zone was used only as a fixing force, attacking just to keep the KPRA busy, denying it reinforcement to the northwestern part of the country.

In summary, the Khmer Rouge's strategic and operational concepts were born out of the stark realities of the Cambodian battlefield. With limited ammunition, as one travelled farther into Cambodia, the NADK had to be very creative as to how it could best use this ammunition. Consequently, most NADK attacks were to undermine the PRK's control of the countryside, although it was not able to hold any target for long in the face of the PRK's counterattack. Limited ammunition basically dictated the tactics.

Accordingly, to make the best of this situation, each NADK attack on a village or district was followed by political action such as the organization of a political march or demonstrations by the local people.<sup>23</sup> The people carried placards and signs protesting against the "Vietnamese aggression" all the while supporting the Khmer Rouge's "peaceful policy" and then making offers for negotiation. Sometimes, the event specifically supported a certain political proposal such as the 8-point peace plan of the CGDK in 1986.<sup>24</sup> When the KPRA's counterattacking elements arrived in the village, they would find only a dazed populace with the Khmer Rouge soldiers long gone, leaving behind their underground networks. The KPRA units described the people as "two-faced," supporting whatever winning side came into the village. "But we understand, they had to do that in order to survive," one KPRA officer noted.<sup>25</sup>

### ***3.1.3 Tactics: military and political concept of guerrilla war***

The scourge of ideology, the Khmer Rouge soldiers were dreaded by everyone, and rightly so. One KPRA officer of the 4th Division noted:

You don't know the effects of ideology until you were in a tank and saw one of the Khmer Rouge fighters running towards you and carrying

an anti-tank mine on his chest. You then fired on him, only to have two other fighters pop up, picking up the mine and continuing running towards you.<sup>26</sup>

One can always sense fear and uneasiness when former soldiers (from any faction) talked about the Khmer Rouge.

As the Khmer Rouge endeavored to fight the war as a People's War, the NADK's tactical doctrine was accordingly based on the guerrilla concept of operation. Former KPRA soldiers spoke of their fear of Khmer Rouge ambushes and anti-infantry tactics.<sup>27</sup> Major roads were almost always ambushed. Small NADK squads relied on generous use of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), which were devastating against infantry, vehicles, and lightly armored units. Sometimes, the Khmer Rouge used recoilless rifles to destroy heavy vehicles. They also used anti-personnel and anti-tank mines in conjunction with improvised booby traps, which included even the primitive bamboo-stick pits.

According to a former KPRA officer in Battambang, the Khmer Rouge had an undying love for ambush. Even when their position was destroyed by a KPRA surprise attack, they still prepared ambush positions to counter-attack as the KPRA left the scene. "We don't know what they did, but whatever they did there was always an ambush, even when they had only a few people left," former KPRA soldiers noted in their official unit's history.<sup>28</sup>

Second, the Khmer Rouge sought to build a cohesive fighting unit. In all of their battles, the Khmer Rouge always fought to retrieve the bodies of their fallen comrades. In some cases, the attack to retrieve the bodies could even be more intense than the original attack itself, especially because the KPRA units did not expect such attacks.<sup>29</sup> According to a former chief of staff of the KPRA's Kampong Thom provincial military command (PMC), the Khmer Rouge never left more than five bodies on the battlefield unless they completely exhausted their resources to recover them.<sup>30</sup> In fact, this tradition had been observed since the time they fought as guerrilla units in the 1970s. For the Khmer Rouge soldiers, their cause was not material gains, but ideology. A former non-communist resistance officer duly noted: "the Khmer Rouge did not eat rice, they ate ideology."<sup>31</sup>

Political actions in the military units were also sustained on a regular basis. For underground units that operated far away from headquarters, and had no regular contact with these headquarters, loyalty was naturally a problem. To ensure loyalty in hard times, the Khmer Rouge leaders organized regular political sessions called "spiritual enhancement sessions."<sup>32</sup> Divisional commanders and regimental commanders attended these sessions on a regular basis. Pol Pot and senior leaders such as Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Sary were the instructors and typically gave classes from Pol Pot's home in Trat Province (Thailand) opposite the Cambodian province of Pursat.<sup>33</sup> The classes involved political theories, the study of "contradictions," and international

situations. The sessions were also used for conflict resolution and adjudication, in which Pol Pot was renowned to be professionally skilled.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2 The non-communist resistance (NCR)

#### 3.2.1 “What have we to lose?”: life of an ordinary Cambodian amid chaos

If one talks about the Russian Revolution of 1917, the word “Bolshevik” tends to come to mind. The February Revolution was a foreign concept and the name Alexander Kerensky unheard of. The keys to this different level of understanding seemed to be the better organization and ruthlessness of the Bolsheviks, which propelled them to success, thus guaranteeing themselves a place in the history books.

It was no different for the four factions in the Cambodian conflict. One could count no less than a hundred movements that claimed to fight against the Vietnamese in the beginning of 1979.<sup>35</sup> Before the establishment of the FUNCINPEC, the KPNLF, Democratic Kampuchea, and People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), everyone was fighting against everyone. Nevertheless, how these groups came into being and how they evolved into the bigger movements has not received sufficient scholarly attention.

In the previous chapter, the previously untold stories of the origins of the PRK were narrated, whose political and armed movement was conceived in the Vietnamese province of Long Giao. No Western sources have ever shed light on this story. Even the Khmer Rouge soldiers themselves had seen their histories ignored. Many were more interested in the genocide issue than the military history of the Khmer Rouge. At the beginning of this chapter, we have already seen how one Khmer Rouge commander struggled to survive under the weight of the Vietnamese blitzkrieg.

But in comparison, they were still better off compared to other smaller groups. The Long Giao battalions and the Khmer Rouge were big movements and possessed enough armaments to fight a small war on their own. But the same could not be said of other groups that eventually formed the FUNCINPEC and KPNLF. Stories of the lives of the combatants of various other groups have been largely undocumented, and their life stories have almost entered oblivion. These loose groups of armed fighters refused to submit to the Khmer Rouge in 1975 and did not join the PRK in 1979 despite their hatred of the Khmer Rouge. To them, the situation was akin to a Khmer aphorism: either meeting the crocodile in the water or encountering the tiger when emerging from the water.

To narrate all of these stories is not the purpose of this book. Nevertheless, this section is dedicated to the story of an unaffiliated combatant (by 1979) whose life, in the author’s judgment, is largely representative of the challenges faced by his contemporaries. The story presented here came exclusively from oral accounts.

The year 1975 was not really the year that the Khmer Rouge controlled all of Cambodia. Some refused to submit to the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge was adept at lying to people that they wanted to kill only so as to minimize resistance. However, it should be noted that not everyone believed the Khmer Rouge in 1975. Some of the former Khmer Republic went into hiding in the closest jungle area as soon as the country fell to the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge called these men “bandits” because they usually came out in small groups to attack Khmer Rouge patrols, break people out of prisons, and persuade the laborers to join them. For lack of a better term, we shall call them the “so-called bandits.” Accounts of the so-called bandits could be verified with survivors in many areas all over Cambodia. These so-called bandits operated deep inside Cambodia and used the jungle as their stronghold.

One group of the so-called bandits also operated along the Cambodian-Thai border in the Northwest. This group consisted of the local people and the former Khmer Republic soldiers who could simply run into Thai territory when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge. While the Thai authorities were aware of the existence of these armed men who resisted against the Khmer Rouge, Thailand did not seem to have a consistent policy toward these groups. For some, it is claimed that the Thai authorities deceived, arrested, and killed many members of the group.<sup>36</sup> Others, however, claimed that Thailand used these so-called bandits purely for instrumental reasons. Some were used as scouts to deal with the Red Thai and some, after the Vietnamese intervention in 1979, were employed as advance parties to guide the way for the Thai army in dealing with the waves of refugees from Cambodia.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of what they did, the majority would later constitute the core cadres of the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC.

The story of a former FUNCINPEC regimental commander of the 2nd Division is enlightening. CT (his initials) was one of the “new people” under the Khmer Rouge (meaning his loyalty to the revolution could not be ascertained). Because he lived in Banteay Chhmar district located near the Cambodian-Thai border, his escape was possible and it was swift. In 1976, he escaped to Thailand where he met Im Chhoudeth, the former Cambodian ambassador to Thailand in 1975, and who stayed there after the Khmer Rouge came to power. Im Chhoudeth would later become a founding member of the KPNLF’s executive committee. CT was assigned to a Cambodian guerrilla unit consisting of 160 soldiers. The group’s task was primarily to interdict the movement of the Red Thais due to the group’s familiarity with jungle in the area. The Red Thais had no chance. In 1977, the last contingent of 60 Red Thais operating in that area surrendered to the Thai authorities.

To the Thai authorities, it seemed that CT’s group had outlived its usefulness. According to CT, his unit was then given a new task. The unit was to operate, this time, deep inside Cambodia. When pressed for details on the main operational objectives, CT seemed unable to remember anything.

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It turned out there was no real objective, or at least none that was feasible. To say that “you go deep into Cambodia and organize an anti-Khmer Rouge resistance group” was not a feasible military objective, given the small size of CT’s group, and given the Khmer Rouge’s strength at the time. Frankly, it looked more like a suicide mission.

An examination of the logistical arrangements is even more illuminating. Each fighter was given a ration of fifty-two cans of rice, five kilograms of salt, and some medicine with boxes that were devoid of anything that could be traced back to Thailand. Each would carry only a rifle and some ammunition, barely enough for five minutes of firefight. The objective was political (i.e. organize an anti-Khmer Rouge resistance group), but the fighters carried nothing to that effect (propaganda). The unlikely objective, plus the unrealistic logistics, could only make one wonder, did the Thai authorities send CT’s group on a suicide mission, hoping that the Khmer Rouge soldiers would do the dirty work for them? After all, the Thai authorities had no clear policy regarding Cambodia and did not have any sympathy with groups like this. Sending CT’s group back into Cambodia to meet its end was probably the most efficient way to deal with the problem.

But as the saying goes in Cambodia, if it’s not your time, then it’s not your time. CT managed to stay hidden and survived in Banteay Srey district in Siem Reap province until the Vietnamese arrived in 1979. In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge collapse, CT returned to his hometown in Banteay Chhmar district and was elected as a chairman of the people’s revolutionary committee (i.e. village chief). But then his old contact reached out to him and proselytized him with gifts of rice, which was a very precious commodity at the time. First, he went to meet Im Chhoudeth, but returned to his village afterwards. In 1981, he went back again for good. This time, he met Ton Chay, the leader of a movement known as *Kleing Moeung*, the namesake of a Cambodian historical hero in the fifteenth century. In the ensuing years, the group would be transformed into the 2nd Division of the *Armée National Sihanoukhiste* (ANS). CT, by virtue of his early arrival to the movement, rose through the ranks to become a regimental commander of the 2nd Division.

In the aftermath of the 16-Camps Campaign by the PAVN in 1985 (see sections below), the ANS was dispersed and reorganized itself into three ad hoc task forces. CT led a two thousand-man strong task force dubbed Angkor Chey II tasked with opening ways behind the PAVN line for the surviving ANS forces (organized into Angkor Chey I and III) to disperse into the Tonle Sap lake area. In the operation after the Vietnamese withdrew in 1989, CT was the one who suggested to Ton Chay to use money instead of a frontal assault to defeat the 7th Regiment of the KPRA’s 286th Division at Kauk Morn village, Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province.

That was the only instance where the 286th Division, which was a heavy mechanized division, lost a regiment during the whole war. CT’s brief trip to that place actually saved him from the debacle at Phnom Srok (see

Chapter 5). CT would later be involved in many high-profile events until the very end of the war and complete peace in 1999. In retirement, CT chose to follow the path of Buddha and became a monk's butler in a pagoda in Banteay Meanchey. The irony for CT is that he had to fight constantly to survive. The alternative to not fighting was certain death. As Samuel Griffith bluntly put it, “‘What do we have to lose?’ Once a great many people ask themselves this question, a revolutionary situation is incipient.”<sup>38</sup> Many Cambodians living and fighting along the Cambodian-Thai border at the time asked themselves exactly that question.

### *3.2.2 Non-communist resistance 1: Khmer People’s National Liberation Front*

#### *3.2.2.1 Revenge of the Khmer Republic*

Also fighting against the Vietnamese and the PRK was a collection of armed groups that were organized in 1979 and controlled the refugee camps that straddled the Cambodia-Thai border. These small bands of fighters were either remnants of the Khmer Republic army or former royalists who continued to fight even after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975. In 1979, as refugees fled to the border, many of these groups became involved in black marketeering, smuggling, as well as preying on the helpless refugees. Many of their leaders were known by the infamous prefix “warlords.”<sup>39</sup>

Eventually, they gravitated towards two major movements. Thailand sought to organize a resistance group to curb the Vietnamese advance, and Prince Sihanouk also looked to organize his own movement so that he would not have to rely on the Khmer Rouge. The Royal Thai Army spearheaded the establishment of the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and, in conjunction with the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Thai Army organized a military unit called Task Force 838 to advise and train its army.

Thailand’s involvements in Cambodian affairs seemed to be an after-thought. As the first PAVN units crossed the Cambodian-Vietnamese border on 25 December 1978, the age-old domino theory became fashionable once more for Thailand. Thus, the ambiguity of policy towards the armed resistance movement in Cambodia disappeared. Thailand began to adopt an active Cambodian policy in earnest.

At roughly the same time that the Khmer Rouge units were fighting retrograde operations to withdraw to the Cambodian-Thai border, Thailand sent an army colonel, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh on a special mission to France. Colonel Chavalit would soon climb the ranks to become a powerful Royal Thai Army commander and was later elected as premier of Thailand in the 1990s. With contacts like the former ambassador of the Khmer Republic to Thailand, Im Chhoudeth, it was not difficult for Thailand to gather together the old veterans of the Khmer Republic army to lead a resistance

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movement. Gathering these veterans was the special mission that colonel Chavalit carried out in France. His first and major mark was the retired brigadier general of the Khmer Republic army, General Dien Del. Dien Del was generally viewed as a disciplined, capable, and composed commander. His integrity was assured and his hatred for communism, particularly the Khmer Rouge, unmatched.

In the old days of the Khmer Republic, one of the most notable events was a campaign the Khmer Republic army carried out in 1971 called Operation Chenla II. The plan called for a general offensive along the stretch of National Road 6 linking Kampong Cham province and Kampong Thom province, and also defending that road from the PAVN hiding in the nearby rubber plantations. Major Dien Del was among the dissenting voices who counselled against the plan because it was militarily indefensible: deploying one single line of defense along the one-hundred kilometer road. As part of the minority opinion, his advice went unheeded and he was sent to a staff course in Saigon.

On 1 December 1971, the PAVN's 9th Division perforated the fragile line at several places, and encircled and destroyed the formation of the Khmer Republic army. One could be so bold as to claim that because Dien Del's opinion was dismissed, the Khmer Republic army lost ten battalions in a single night, a loss from which they never recovered.

Until 1975, Dien Del maintained his fight against the Khmer Rouge, even though some of his comrades actually sold war matériels to the Khmer Rouge for personal gain at the expense of the republic. After the fall of Phnom Penh, Dien Del went to the United States and then France, participating in various associations of Cambodia abroad.

When Colonel Chavalit came to France to recruit former officers to lead a resistance movement, he did not need to ask twice. On 5 March 1979, an armed group, the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces (KPNLAF) was proclaimed with Dien Del as commander. In fact, the KPNLAF was not a monolithic movement, but an amalgamation of smaller movements operating along the Cambodian-Thai border following the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975. Perhaps with Thailand as the patron, the KPNLAF could attract almost all of those smaller movements. Some, however, refused to join the KPNLAF (such as the MOULKINAKA group, cf. next section) and some groups splintered (like the Klaing Moeung movement). The existence of these residual forces opened the way for Prince Sihanouk to organize his own movement. This section will explain the origin of the KPNLAF, while Prince Sihanouk's movement will be discussed in the next section.

### *3.2.2.2 Organization*

Before and immediately after 1979, Thailand did not really have any clear policy towards the plight of refugees in Cambodia, or those running away

from, or fighting against, the Khmer Rouge. In some cases, the refugees who marched to the border in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge collapse in January 1979 were forced to march back into Cambodia across minefields and malaria-infested jungle. It was only after the arrival of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the border, and the creation of an ad hoc unit, the United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO) that Thailand began to accept the settlement of refugees along the Cambodian-Thai border. The establishment of the KPNLAF reinforced this policy because Thailand immediately saw the benefit of having refugee camps along the border as they could help increase the KPNLAF's manpower.

By this time, Thailand seemed to have found a perfect plan to stop the Vietnamese expansion in Southeast Asia, and Thailand also seemed to have found in General Dien Del a man who was loyal to a cause, and who was also a capable commander. But one can never be too careful. In case General Dien Del wanted to become a military dictator or act in any way that contravened Thailand's interests, he would be checked by the political apparatus (KPNLF), and vice versa. In other words, the KPNLF and the KPNLAF were supposed to counterbalance each other to keep the movement in check and to make sure the movement could not do anything that was harmful to Thai interests. As one former official of the KPNLF recounted, the Thai civilian government and the ministry of foreign affairs tended to support the political faction while the Thai military tended to support the military faction.<sup>40</sup>

On 9 October 1979, about seven months after the creation of a unified armed group, the political body was established, called the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). The KPNLF was organized as an anti-communist and anti-Vietnamese political resistance movement. The KPNLF was to be led by a committee called the Executive Committee (EXCO) or, as the Francophone leaders in the groups always liked to call, the *Comité Exécutif* (COMEX). The EXCO was composed of twelve members (called "delegates"), each in charge of specific areas such as military, economic, cultural, foreign affairs, etc.

Over time, prominent figures of the *ancient régime* started to emerge at the border, although certainly not without Thailand's blessing. Another military commander who arrived at the border was General Sak Suthsakhan who was chief of the general staffs in the 1970s as well as President of the Khmer Republic in the dying days of the republic. He played the role of symbolic commander of the KPNLAF while General Dien Del (General Sak's former subordinate) was chief of the general staff. The leader of the KPNLF was Son Sann, a former prime minister under Prince Sihanouk in the 1960s. As someone who was not involved in the coup d'état against Prince Sihanouk in 1970, Son Sann was thought to be more amenable to working with Prince Sihanouk and was someone Prince Sihanouk could accept in joining the fight against the Vietnamese.

While Son Sann was president of the movement, in the complicated, or rather obscured, organization of the EXCO he was only a delegate. Perhaps he was the *primus inter pares* delegate (Latin for “first among equals”), but a delegate nonetheless. It seemed Thailand was being careful not to make this movement too unified and too strong. But that was the cause of all the troubles to follow. Later, while Son Sann thought he was the president of the movement, thus entitled to some prerogatives, others such as General Dien Del thought that no man was above the EXCO. But in 1979, that was a moot issue.

The KPNLAF started to build its ranks under General Dien Del. A professional soldier by trade, General Dien Del was preoccupied with building a force that could stand against the PAVN. His motto was “organization, organization, organization and training, training, training.”<sup>41</sup> The KPNLAF boasted the organization of a formal officer school in the jungle. The officer school called “sala youthin” (French: *Ecole d’Officier Actif* or EOA) produced the first batch of officers, called the *Elèves Officer Actifs*, in 1981. The cadets had to go through a six-month basic military training and another three months of specialized training in the different branches of the army such as infantry, intelligence, combat engineer, transportation, communication, cavalry, and heavy weapons. Interviews with former students revealed that most specialized trainings were done “theoretically” without actual practice or live fire exercise due to the lack of war matériels.<sup>42</sup> Regardless, the training and the existence of the school itself were great feats, given the conditions the KPNLAF found itself in at the time.

The training attempted to instill in each combatant the spirit of guerrilla tactical doctrine. As a former officer put it, the motto of the KPNLAF’s tactical doctrine was “Look, listen, don’t speak, reflect, adapt, and only then be ‘adopted’ as a combatant of the KPNLAF.”<sup>43</sup> Upon completion of the training, cadets would earn the rank of sub-lieutenant, part of the resurrection of the system that prevailed under the *ancient régime*. According to some estimates, the EOA produced a total of seven batches of officers at the Ampil base.<sup>44</sup> After the base was overrun by the PAVN in 1985, the KPNLAF moved inside Thailand and the EOA continued to produce between three and four more batches of officers.

In all, the school produced around one thousand officers who went on to serve in various KPNLAF combat units and the KPNLAF General Staff Headquarters. Some senior officers went on to receive further study and training in various places such as the high command course in Thailand, Malaysian guerrilla training camps, training camps in Thailand run by the elite British commando unit, the Special Air Service (SAS), and anti-tank weapon training inside Cambodia by officers from various ASEAN countries.<sup>45</sup> The KPNLAF also boasted a Political Warfare School. In January 1984, President Son Sann presided over a ceremony to kick off the fifth batch of officer training course as well as the 27th training of political warfare students.<sup>46</sup>

### *3.2.2.3 Thailand's check-and-balance policy bites its tail: KPNLF's internal rift*

All military resistance groups need some sort of political apparatus able to produce ideology to help maintain the integrity of the rank-and-file, and to recruit more people to the movement. From the standpoint of the Thai authorities, or any sponsor for that matter, a political organization could also check and balance the military organization and prevent a military despot unable to be controlled. Another way the sponsors controlled the resistance movement was through the distribution of weapons, food, and medicine, or limitation thereof.<sup>47</sup>

The KPNLF was controlled by the EXCO. General Dien Del, in particular, recalled that he did not really like such a system: “you can’t control military activities through a committee.”<sup>48</sup> But as a military officer, and probably due in no small part to the sponsors’ pressure, Dien Del had to yield to the collective political decision and he held the position of “Delegate for Military Affairs” in the EXCO.<sup>49</sup> Son Sann held the position of President of the KPNLF.

In the early 1980s, it increasingly appeared that the sponsors had mulled over the possibility of unifying all of the resistance movements under the political umbrella of Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge) due to the fact that this government was the de jure government of Cambodia, having held the seat at the United Nations. Accordingly, framing the war as a struggle between this government and Vietnam was the same as branding the Vietnamese as an aggressor as well as pointing to the Vietnamese-backed government (People’s Republic of Kampuchea) as an illegitimate, puppet government.

The only question was who was going to lead such a unified movement. Surely, most of the KPNLF who were remnants of the Khmer Republic did not like the Khmer Rouge, neither did Prince Sihanouk who was deceived and imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. But Prince Sihanouk also did not like the KPNLF, because most of them were part of the conspiracy that deposed him in 1970. The feeling was mutual for many people in the KPNLF. In other words, all three resistance movements did not really see eye to eye with each other.

Soon, an idea was floated that the unified movement would not be an amalgamation of the smaller movements, but instead would function like a confederation in which the constituting movements still held power and identity.<sup>50</sup> Logically, this meant that there could be two major movements, the communist Khmer Rouge and a non-communist movement, probably the KPNLF with Son Sann as president. But then, it was impossible to ignore the elephant in the room: Prince Sihanouk. Still immensely popular among the Cambodian populace, Prince Sihanouk simply could not be excluded from Cambodian politics.

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According to one of Son Sann's confidants, in a secret meeting between Deng Xiao Ping and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, it was agreed that Prince Sihanouk could play an important role in the non-communist faction, information to which Son Sann was not given access.<sup>51</sup> According to this account, Son Sann still maintained the hope that he would be accepted by the sponsoring countries, as well as the KPNLF, as the counterweight to the Khmer Rouge in a unified, anti-Vietnamese grand coalition. For one, Son Sann was not part of the conspiracy that deposed Prince Sihanouk in 1970, so he himself thought he could lead a movement with Prince Sihanouk playing the role of symbolic figurehead or even simply as a deputy to him.<sup>52</sup> Such a proposition was quite risky and would require that the KPNLF speak with one voice. To some people in the KPNLF, as soon as there was news of a possibility of joining a grand coalition, President Son Sann became increasingly authoritative and arbitrary.<sup>53</sup>

Predictably, the unclear mandate of the office of the President of the KPNLF started to affect the unity of the movement, and a tense under-current started to surface. According to a former officer of the KPNLAF, in many meetings with the other EXCO delegates, camp administrators, and the people, Son Sann always said that the KPNLF had reached a crossroad and must make a turn.<sup>54</sup> He asked them to grant him full power to decide on the future of the movement.<sup>55</sup> But this did not sit well with General Dien Del. It seems that Son Sann viewed his position as one of overarching authority, while General Dien Del viewed the President as the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) delegate but a delegate nevertheless.

As the KPNLF was deliberating on whether or not to join the anti-Vietnamese grand coalition, President Son Sann asked the EXCO to grant him full power as the one and only representative of the KPNLF in the grand coalition. General Dien Del saw that as an attempt to shut down the EXCO, the collective decision-making body of the KPNLF. He was the only voice that counselled against the full power of the president and reminded the meeting that EXCO was the only institution with the authority to guide the KPNLF.<sup>56</sup> According to a former high-ranking officer of the KPNLAF, a public exchange ensued and after General Dien Del warned against the usurpation of democratic principles, the General, in military uniform and accompanied by an unarmed soldier, walked out of the meeting in protest.<sup>57</sup> After that, the rift never healed until the end of the war.

In front of his house at the KPNLAF's headquarter at Banteay Ampil, General Dien Del put up an altar decorated with a can of incense sticks with a sign in Khmer and French that could be translated as "Death of the EXCO."<sup>58</sup> A ritual was usually performed, in Khmer tradition, to commemorate and pay homage to one's forbears. In this case, General Dien Del considered the day Son Sann asked for full power as the day the EXCO died. Son Sann began to gather his loyalists around him, and so did the military faction.<sup>59</sup> Those who did not support Son Sann began to refer to

him as “L’Empereur” (The Emperor) when they talked about Son Sann behind his back.<sup>60</sup>

Up until 1982, the KPNLF was functioning somewhat normally despite the rift, which was an amazing feat. It seems that the anti-Vietnamese sentiments transcended even the rift within the movement. But the rift between the Son Sann loyalists and the Dien Del/Sak Sutsakhan loyalists was never resolved until the end of the war. Task Force 838 and the CIA were usually the mediators between the two factions.<sup>61</sup> But sometimes, “functioning somewhat normally” is not enough to win a war, for according to the Prussian war theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, successful war is one where there are feasible political objectives. Without a symbiotic relationship between war and policy, one risks carrying out military operations that do not promise political gains. Such was the case of the KPNLAF’s war plan of 1982, which we shall discuss in sections below.

### 3.2.3 Non-communist resistance 2: *Samdech Oeuv’s (king father’s) army*

The second non-communist movement was Prince Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC. The organization of its armed wing, the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste* (ANS), paralleled the KPNLAF in many ways. The majority of its forces were raised from the border camps, and the organization of the military regions of both sides also paralleled each other. Just like the KPNLAF, the ANS was born out of several armed groups that controlled the camps along the Cambodian-Thai border. As we have seen in the previous section, many small movements joined together and formed the KPNLF, mainly because this movement had Thailand as a sponsor, which made it easier to recruit soldiers.

Prince Sihanouk, on the other hand, had always been a maverick politician. Not a lot of people liked him, not because he was bad or incapable, but on the contrary. Anyone who supported Prince Sihanouk had better know that the Prince would not willingly do their bidding. The Khmer Rouge had to deceive the Prince and intimidate him at the same time. This did not come without any cost, however. After Prince Sihanouk made a speech condemning the Vietnamese in 1979, thus maintaining the legitimacy of Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge government) at the United Nations, the Khmer Rouge could no longer control the Prince.

In his book entitled *Prisonier des Khmer Rouges*, Prince Sihanouk recounted that he had to ask the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to help evacuate him to a place where the Khmer Rouge could not get to him.<sup>62</sup> Because this request was made in New York, the headquarters of the United Nations, the task was not overly difficult. But then again, the Prince became a one-man operation, as many countries understood that Prince Sihanouk was a maverick politician. Ultimately, only China gave support to Prince Sihanouk. The Prince could run his own movement, which

would also have an armed wing. Prince Sihanouk also received support from his longtime friend, Marshal Kim Il Sung of North Korea, who provided the Prince with a palace in Pyongyang equipped with all luxurious amenities.

While the Prince was able to establish a political movement, there was still a question surrounding the military arm of the movement. Most of the fighters had already joined the KPNLAF who had structure on the ground. Regardless of the disadvantages, Prince Sihanouk had one clear advantage over any other people, namely his immense popularity among the Cambodian populace. It was not trivial to have people consider him as the only leader who could end the war. Many people who had lived during prosperous times in the 1960s under the Prince's rule held the belief that "the country will not know peace if the King is not in the country." This was a belief that persisted until 1993, and it was a belief that the FUNCINPEC, as a political party, did not hesitate to exploit.

For once, this popularity seemed to help the Prince organize a military arm for his movement, despite not being able to travel freely to the Cambodian-Thai border. The Prince was able to capture the allegiance of one movement that later became the backbone of his army: the MOULINAKA. The *Mouvement pour la Libération de la Nation Khmère* (MOULINAKA) or translated to English as the Movement for the Liberation of the Khmer Nation, was one of the armed groups that had refused to join the KPNLAF. Formed by Kong Sileah, a former navy captain of the Khmer Republic, the MOULINAKA was truly an independent group, just like its founder. To understand this, one has to go back to the history of Cambodia and Thailand. The kingdom of Siam was much a threat to Cambodia, as it was to Vietnam. However, most of the movements that joined the KPNLF were pragmatic enough to view the Vietnamese as a more pressing threat, and the support of Thailand was essential to be able to counter that threat.

Kong Sileah, however, was an idealist. He was not going to bow to Thailand just because he needed their support to fight against the Vietnamese. Joining the KPNLAF was therefore out of the question despite repeated urges by the senior leaders of the KPNLAF. In one incident, it clashed with the Thai army. According to Conboy, one day a Cambodian female refugee was raped and then murdered by unknown Thai soldiers.<sup>63</sup> Unable to find the assailants, Kong Sileah took matters into his own hands, and the MOULINAKA killed one private in the Thai military as retribution. The Thai local military unit was furious and raided Kong Sileah's camp in retaliation. Kong Sileah and his men had to flee and took shelter near a camp controlled by the KPNLAF.

The MOULINAKA pledged its allegiance to Prince Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC and became the backbone of the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste* (ANS) which could be translated to English as Sihanouk's National Army. Two other movements joined hands with the MOULINAKA and became part of the ANS. A movement called *Kleing Moeung* (named after a Cambodian



*Figure 3.1* The four factions of the Cambodian Civil War. *Top left:* KPNLF. President Son Sann of the KPNLF listened to the briefing by Gen. Pann That (far left, beret) in 1987. General Dien Del (third left) stood with Abdul Gaffar Peang-Meth (fourth left). Standing in the center of the photo, wearing a khaki safari outfit, and listening to the briefing was President Son Sann. Directly behind him (left) was General Sak Sutsakhan. Beneath this public display of unity was an unbridgeable rift. *Bottom left:* Democratic Kampuchea. NADK's all-female transportation unit. The RPG rounds were the standard ammunitions. The NADK tactic: shock by overwhelming firepower and ferocious infantry assault. This tactic almost entirely depended on the effectiveness of the transportation units. The NADK Bulletin commented on the photo: “Even with arduous trip across rugged terrain, our female combatants happily carried out the duties with warm smile.” *Bottom right:* FUNCINPEC. The ANS battalions in review. The units’ color was the flag of the Kingdom of Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk before 1970. The use of this flag sent a clear signal to the general population: the objective of this ANS army was to return Cambodia to its former glory under Prince Sihanouk. *Top right:* PRK. A KPKA soldier distributed his own rice allowance to the people. Immediately after 1979, the KPKA was ordered not only to fight against the return of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot but also to “help rescue the people from starvation.”

Sources: *Top left:* Courtesy of a former high-ranking official of the KPNLF, caption by author. *Bottom left:* NADK Bulletin. *Bottom right:* ANS Bulletin, caption by author. *Top right:* SPK, caption by author.

historical figure in the sixteenth century) pledged allegiance to the FUNCINPEC and became part of the ANS. In fact, part of this group had already decided to join the KPNLAF. Another part decided to follow the Prince. The third group was the *Oddar Tus* (Northern) movement. MOULINAKA became the 1st Brigade, the *Kleing Moeung* became the 2nd Brigade, and *Oddar Tus* became the 3rd Brigade. Together, they formed the heart and soul of the ANS, Samdech Oev's army (King Father's Army), which was committed to returning Prince Sihanouk to his rightful place as the King of Cambodia.

### **3.3 PAVN's response to the one-country-two-administrations: the 1982–1983 dry season offensive**

#### ***3.3.1 One country, two states: military angle***

The three resistance movements had their own particularities. Of the three, the Khmer Rouge was the biggest, the most elusive, and the most deadly. Everything associated with this group could be described in superlatives. The Khmer Rouge had also successfully shown that despite the loss of sanctuaries along the border, they still maintained the ability to hit significant targets all over Cambodia. The FUNCINPEC and its armed wing the ANS could be described with only one superlative: having the most legitimate leader, Prince Sihanouk.

The KPNLF, on the other hand, was a different breed, one that caused the PAVN to launch a premature dry season offensive in 1982. The origin of the Vietnamese dry season offensive was essentially political in nature. For five years after the Vietnamese victory in 1979, the guerrillas, especially the KPNLF, had tried to create what Prime Minister Hun Sen of the PRK would later describe as “one country, two administrative/state systems.” The refugee camps under KPNLF administration were sprawling mini-cities with various institutions that a state would possess: schools, small-scale manufactures, religious institutions, security apparatus, military training camps, propaganda establishment, a school of performing arts, and hospitals.<sup>64</sup> They would later own a radio station, broadcasting their anthems, nationalistic songs, and other propaganda messages.

On the political front, the CGDK was also very active despite its young history. The KPNLF ran a series of information bulletins, which appeared every fortnight. The bulletin was not a mere leaflet, but it was a rather advanced form of propaganda magazine. The bulletin contained editorials, full-color photos, battlefield information, propaganda messages, political activities, as well as activities of the KPNLF's leaders on the international stage. On the back page, the magazine also had a form that potential subscribers could fill out with their information so the bulletin could be sent to their address.

The printing office appeared to be located in the border camps while agents in Bangkok with the alias “Kok Sar” (Khmer word for “White Crane,” an important figure in mystic Khmer poetry) took charge of distribution. Kok Sar was one of the small armed group that joined together with others to form the KPNLF. The Movement was the only one with a publication and it was for this reason that the KPNLF put it in charge of the magazine. Foreign aid workers in the camps at the time noted that all printing materials (improvised or otherwise) could be requisitioned in the camps themselves.<sup>65</sup> The ANS followed suit although the Khmer Rouge had to wait until 1985 to have their own bi-monthly bulletin. Later, the KPNLF bulletin even ran a program called “Sponsor a Guerrilla,” which called for the Khmer expatriates abroad and international donors to identify and sponsor a KPNLF guerrilla in the fight against the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia.

But these were not the worst nuisances confronting the PAVN in Cambodia. This “KPNLF state” also had an army and it intended to use it. By 1982, the KPNLF already had a liberation plan of Cambodia. Explanation of the plan could be found in a study by Steve Heder in 1984.<sup>66</sup> The plan was rather born out of unusual circumstances. One had to go back to the beginning of the KPNLAF. At its inception, General Dien Del was the commander of the movement, but the movement must include other smaller groups in order to consolidate and expand its influence. Among them was one particular group called “Nen Rorng” (once again, this was a namesake of a Cambodian folklore figure), which was led by a man by the alias Ta Luat. The man was not always on good terms with General Dien Del and the headquarters. One former KPNLAF battalion commander described the relationship as a “struggle for power to become high-ranking person.”<sup>67</sup>

On 11 October 1981, Ta Luat was called for a meeting with General Dien Del at Banteay Ampil, the headquarter of the KPNLAF. After the meeting, as he left the headquarters, Ta Luat, his pregnant wife, and a bodyguard were assassinated by unknown Cambodian guerrillas.<sup>68</sup> While General Dien Del claimed the attack was a result of the conspiracy of Thai soldiers who were involved in black market operations with Ta Luat, the soldiers of the former would have none of it.<sup>69</sup> That day, Zone 201 (a battalion formation) under the command of Ta Maing, a close associate of Ta Luat actually fought their fellow KPNLAF soldiers to retrieve the body of its commander. Even today, all of them were convinced that General Dien Del orchestrated the attack.<sup>70</sup>

The event forced President Son Sann to relieve General Dien Del of his duty and he was replaced by a rather loose group of commanders, including Thach Reng, another high-ranking officer of the former Khmer Republic army who had controlled a special force unit in the *ancien régime*. This new group was eager to do something to show off their skills. Such was the inception of the Liberation Plan of 1982. Typical of all KPNLAF plans, and of the Khmer Republic army’s war plans in the 1970s for that matter, the

plan looked elegant on paper but was one that would unravel within the proverbial first minute of contact with the enemy. The liberation plan called for a three-stage offensive.<sup>71</sup>

After its formation, the KPNLAF was divided into three sectors called Zones. The Southern Zone operated in the mountainous area of Pursat and Battambang provinces. The Central Zone included Banteay Ampil, the KPNLAF headquarters, in Banteay Meanchey and Ouddar Meanchey area. The last one, the Northern Zone operated in Preah Vihear province. The plan made use of all three Zones. In the first stage, the KPNLAF would drive into Cambodia, stopping at the first major population center, Sisophon in Banteay Meanchey province. In the second stage, the KPNLAF would expand its influence deeper into Cambodia by controlling National Road 5 and 6 using Sisophon as the launching pad. The third stage was the most ambitious of all, which would involve the KPNLAF capturing the Battambang and Pursat provincial capitals as well as controlling a large stretch of National Road 5 and the northern part of the Tonle Sap Lake.<sup>72</sup>

The planned push by the KPNLAF occurred at the border of the area of responsibility of two major Vietnamese military formations. Front 479 operated in Battambang and Siem Reap provinces while Front 579 operated in Preah Vihear and the Northeastern provinces. With such opposing forces, how would the KPNLAF survive the PAVN's counterattack? The KPNLAF also figured that out as well. According to Heder, the KPNLAF's Central Zone would be in charge of the main push.<sup>73</sup> If Front 479 attacked from the west, then the KPNLAF's Southern Zone would launch guerrilla operations to cut the rear lines of Front 479, forcing it to abandon attack on the Central Zone. Likewise, if Front 579 attacked from the east, the KPNLAF's Northern Zone would launch guerrilla operations to cut the rear lines of Front 579, forcing it to retreat. Obviously, the plan rested on the assumption that simple guerrilla operations would force a PAVN's Front formation that would have tens of thousands of soldiers to retreat (one PAVN Front had more soldiers than the entire KPNLAF, which numbered around seven thousand).

As presented, the plan looked elegant and would have driven the Vietnamese out of Cambodia in only a few years. However, any avid observer with some experience in military planning or anyone who had been through staff college would see things differently. The first major issue is that the plan did not take into account the most dangerous course of action the PAVN could take, namely, conventional operations which would cut through the KPNLAF's "liberated areas." Instead, the KPNLAF plan assumed that the PAVN would be a "cooperative enemy," which is a dangerous assumption that would be a major flaw in almost any war plans. In this instance, the assumption was that the enemy would fight in such a way that would make one's plan successful, and simple guerrilla operations would send the PAVN running in panic.

However, if each PAVN's Front were to allocate even one division to the operation, the PAVN would outnumber the KPNLF's entire force of seven thousand fighters. But such complicated details did not bother the KPNLAF planners. Even the fact that the KPNLAF fighters would carry out this campaign without heavy artillery or the provision of sustained ammunition was not considered to be important.

### *3.3.2 One country, two states: political and diplomatic angles*

Running makeshift state institutions and then claiming to be a state, was an audacious attempt at nation-building, but this was still a long way away from winning the war. Also, the KPNLF was composed of former Khmer Republic veterans, which made them the enemy of Prince Sihanouk.

Both the Prince and the KPNLF hated the Khmer Rouge due to the bitter memories that resulted from contact with each other. For the Khmer Rouge, this feeling was mutual. In other words, the Cambodian resistance movements consisted of three groups that hated each other in equal measure. This was understood by the sponsoring countries, which then worked to bring them all together and unite them against the Vietnamese. But to do that, a way was needed to find a way to deal with the baggage that the Khmer Rouge brought with them.

The infamous legacy of the Khmer Rouge regime was the genocide that killed almost one million people out of the total population of eight million. For the survivors, the Khmer Rouge was an existential threat that they had to fight against at all costs. Preventing the return of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's genocidal regime became the main propaganda message of the Vietnamese-backed government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The PRK established its army called the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA). The genocide message not only motivated many people to join this army, but this was also used to justify Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia.

From Vietnam's point of view, the intervention was justified because it was based on the grounds that the Khmer Rouge attacked Vietnam first and that Vietnam intervened to put an end to a genocidal regime. In this view, the Vietnamese troops were simply the "volunteer army" that came into Cambodia for "selfless duty for the sake of international socialist solidarity."<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia called themselves the "Vietnamese Volunteer Army." According to this logic, they were not the PAVN, but Vietnamese soldiers who volunteered to fight for the sake of humanity and for the survival of their fellow socialist regime, the PRK.<sup>75</sup> The sponsoring countries knew the Khmer Rouge alone could not be the leader of the resistance movement, nor was it easy to make it work with other non-communist groups.

The two non-communist resistance movements were caught in an awkward position. For the KPNLF, the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia

was the materialization of the fear from the 1960s and 1970s of the proverbial *Westward March*.<sup>76</sup> But even though they and the Khmer Rouge now had mutual enemies, they still did not cooperate. Another very important actor in this awkward situation was Prince Sihanouk. The Prince faced a dilemma. He had bitter experiences with the Khmer Rouge. Yet, the Khmer Rouge was the strongest fighting force of the resistance groups opposing the Vietnamese and the PRK. Ultimately, Prince Sihanouk was determined not to be fooled by the Khmer Rouge for a second time, and he created his own movement, the FUNCINPEC. Prince Sihanouk established the movement in February 1981 in France, and in March the same year, the FUNCINPEC absorbed three movements fighting along the Cambodian-Thai border, which formed the core of the ANS.<sup>77</sup> With the ANS as the military wing, albeit the smallest of the resistance movements, Prince Sihanouk could now prevent the FUNCINPEC from degenerating into the movement that he symbolically led in the 1970s: much vanity, but no real power.

However, in spite of having a common and stronger enemy, the three resistance groups worked separately to fight against the Vietnamese forces and the PRK, and they sometimes attacked each other as well. But in 1982, Prince Sihanouk finally gave in to pressure from the sponsoring countries and accepted the establishment of an anti-Vietnamese grand coalition, called the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which combined the FUNCINPEC, the Khmer Rouge, and the KPNLF into one single political organization opposing the PRK and the Vietnamese. While this was, on the surface, a unified movement, all three constituting movements asserted that it was not an amalgamation of the three movements, and each would still maintain their separate command and control systems as well as their separate identities.<sup>78</sup> In essence, the CGDK was a political apparatus, although there was no joint command between the three resistance movements. The only military advantage from such a grouping was that now the three agreed not to fight among themselves.

Prince Sihanouk explained his rational, yet excruciating decision:

In 1979, 1980, 1981, neither myself nor Mr. Son Sann wanted to enter into a coalition with the Khmer Rouge. But in June 1982, we had to do so after all, because our followers, i.e. the patriotic and nationalist Khmers as a whole, who had decided to fight against the Vietnamese, in order to save our fatherland, would have received neither arms nor ammunition from China nor foodstuffs or any other humanitarian aid from friendly countries nor the support of the UNO [United Nations Organization], if we had remained simple “rebels.” China and ASEAN gave us to understand that our two nationalist movements, our two national liberation fronts, would not have any future outside the lawful framework of the state of Democratic Kampuchea, a full member of the UNO.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, the Khmer Rouge would be a necessary evil because its government, the Democratic Kampuchea, still retained a seat at the United Nations. This put Vietnam squarely in the position of the aggressor fighting against a sovereign Cambodia, as well as delegitimizing the PRK. In a joint summit by the three resistance movements in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the CGDK was officially proclaimed on 22 June 1982 with Prince Sihanouk as president, Son Sann as the prime minister, and Khieu Samphan of Democratic Kampuchea holding the office of minister of foreign affairs. The compromise established the CGDK as the internationally recognized government of Cambodia during the war, and any resolution to the contrary was consistently voted down at the United Nations. Now the resistance movements not only boasted de facto state structures, they also had a legal foundation for that claim to statehood.

On the battlefield, the Liberation Plan of 1982 was also conceived. After the shakeup of its military structure, the new KPNLAF leadership needed to show real progress. To some extent, it was a timely operation, maybe not feasible, but timely. With the political situation going its way, the resistance movement should now consider some military action.

Therefore, on 27 December 1982, a KPNLAF detachment captured a hamlet by the name of Yeang Dangkum in Battambang—Banteay Meanchey province. This isolated hamlet was more of a military outpost manned by the PAVN and the PRK. But by capturing it, the KPNLAF believed that its plan would bear fruit. According to Conboy, the KPNLAF also overran Banteay Chhmar district, albeit controlling it for one night only.<sup>80</sup>

Predictably, these disturbing developments did not sit well with Vietnam and the PRK. In essence, by late 1982, the resistance movements had enough structure to call themselves a state, albeit a very small one. More importantly, all of this happened on Cambodian territory. Not only did they control territory where they ran those institutions, but they had a military that was going to expand that territory as well. At the same time, this exiled government was the internationally recognized government of Cambodia. As Vietnam struggled to build legitimacy for the PRK, such a parallel system could not be tolerated. Therefore, newly defeated in the political and diplomatic arenas, Vietnam had only one card left to play: military might. Such was the origin of the 1983 dry season offensive.

### **3.3.3 1983: the PAVN flexed its muscles**

Yeang Dangkum and Banteay Chhmar were swiftly recaptured by the PAVN. Time was of the essence. In early March 1983, the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, in which Prince Sihanouk was an active participant, were to meet in a summit in New Delhi, India. Vietnam and the PRK were about to receive another round of condemnation. According to some analysts, Vietnam had decided to launch a quick offensive to preempt such eventuality.<sup>81</sup> According to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, on 31 January

1983, the PAVN launched an offensive on Nong Chan, a border camp belonging to the KPNLF, which was also settled by the MOULINAKA before it became the ANS.<sup>82</sup> Considered as the land bridge from which one could channel the guerrillas and war matériels into the interior of Cambodia, the camp had forty thousand refugees and was defended by thousands of guerrillas. The PAVN was reported to have used the 10th Division manned by northern regulars to attack the camp.<sup>83</sup> After two days of fierce defense, the MOULINAKA and the KPNLAF were forced to abandon the camp after it became clear that the camp could not be held without heavy losses for the defenders.<sup>84</sup>

On 5 February, the PAVN massed forces to prepare for the assault on two other camps. On 8 February, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that the PAVN used twenty-five T-54 main battle tanks to assault Nong Samet and Ban Sangae, both of which were not very far from Nong Chan.<sup>85</sup> At Ban Sagnae, the new KPNLAF commander, Thach Reng, boasted a three-tier defense line to protect the camp that had 21,000 civilians and 5,000 guerrillas.<sup>86</sup> The seven thousand men of PAVN's 7th Division supported by tanks moved from the eastern provinces in Cambodia to attack the camp.<sup>87</sup> The camps were set ablaze and the guerrillas retreated. This incident was the first time the Vietnamese and Thai soldiers fought against each other. The Thai military supreme commander, General Arthit Komlang-ek, told the press that the encounter killed five Thai soldiers and both sides exchanged artillery fire and in one instance Thailand also launched an air attack.<sup>88</sup>

On 31 March, the PAVN onslaught turned to the Khmer Rouge at Phnom Chat, which was yet another resistance camp.<sup>89</sup> Two regimental task forces of the PAVN's 75th Division from Sisophon squared off against twenty-five hundred Khmer Rouge fighters.<sup>90</sup> Adept in fighting the multi-stage People's War, however, the Khmer Rouge did not put up stiff resistance in the face of a large and stronger force. Nevertheless, it was reported that the PAVN lost fifty men and had two hundred wounded.<sup>91</sup>

On 3 April 1983, the PAVN attacked two other camps, this time the camps belonging to the FUNCINPEC. O'Bok and O'Smach had thirty thousand civilians and were defended by a combined force of two thousand guerrillas. The PAVN's 72nd Division from Samraong district in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province moved about one hundred kilometers northeast to attack the two camps.<sup>92</sup> On 4 April, the two camps fell to the PAVN.

The offensive seemed to die down after the attack on the FUNCINPEC camps. The KPNLF's headquarters at Banteay Ampil was surprisingly left untouched by the PAVN. The offensive in 1983 seemed to be aimed at all three factions of the CGDK. In response to the offensive, China resumed their shelling of Vietnam's northern border, although the shelling was nowhere near the scale of what happened in 1979 and it was aimed at random targets, ostensibly to deliver more of a "lesson" than to achieve any significant military result.<sup>93</sup> The 1983 dry season offensive ended with

anti-climactic events. After destroying the camps, and after the resistance movements retreated, the PAVN also retreated to the rear, allowing the resistance to move back in and re-establish the camps.<sup>94</sup>

Evidence seemed to suggest that the PAVN's dry season offensive in 1983 was a makeshift solution to fast-paced political, military, and diplomatic developments that far outstripped what the Vietnamese had planned. If we are to believe what a senior officer of the PAVN's Front 479 described about the Vietnamese strategy in Cambodia, then Vietnam wanted to build a friendly and viable regime capable of defending itself.<sup>95</sup> In 1983, this objective was not yet completed because the largest military formation that the PRK could field was the brigade, and its new divisions were still inexperienced. Even if the 1983 campaign was successful, the PRK would not be mature enough to take on responsibilities. In this case, the PAVN would need to launch another campaign when the PRK was mature enough.

But the aggressive policy and success of the resistance movements forced the PAVN's hand. The PAVN was forced to launch a military campaign to derail some of the CGDK's progress, even if it meant dragging along the young KPRA units. Most of the KPRA units were deployed either in reserve or in support roles at the rear.<sup>96</sup> In one example, the KPRA unit had to build its strength and upgrade itself in the midst of the intense campaign. That was the root of the problem that decisively put a brake on the PAVN's offensive in 1983.

The following is a never before published account of what could have been the cause of the Vietnamese purge on the PRK officials in the midst of the 1983 campaign.<sup>97</sup>

In early 1983, in order to prepare for cooperation with the PAVN's offensive to come, the General Staff Headquarters of the KPRA sent a company of highly trained soldiers to reinforce its newly established 286th Division in Siem Reap province. The company was described as a group of soldiers trained in the *Dac Biet Cong Tac* (special operations) tradition, which was a renowned skill in the PAVN. During the Vietnam War, American soldiers came to know this type of soldier as "sappers" who often crept up during the night and stormed fortified outposts. The mission was dubbed "special" and rightly so, due to the inherent danger in launching frontal assaults on fortified targets. During the Vietnam War, those who volunteered for the mission usually received much accolade before these battles.<sup>98</sup>

This reputation also extended to those non-Vietnamese troops who had received such training. A company of *Dac Cong* troops could be worth as much as a battalion or a regiment, or so the trainees believed. These were varieties of the same theme that were repeated again and again by the soldiers of the *Dac Cong* company who were travelling to the 286th Division.<sup>99</sup> During their trip to the headquarters of the 286th Division, they had camped on National Road 6 (in Kralanh district) at the junction road that would lead north to Samraong district. One has to note that while the trip today

would take hours, the condition of the road at the time was so bad (due to years of neglect and destruction resulting from repeated military operations) that the trip could take days. During the night at Kralanh, the four ZIL-130 trucks carrying the *Dac Cong* company stopped and the soldiers camped near a cluster of several hamlets. During their chat with the local populace, the soldiers made the mistake of telling the locals who they were, what they were trained to do, and where they planned to go. Some of the locals were undercover Khmer Rouge agents who wasted no time in relaying this information to their comrades at Srey Snom district to the north. To the Khmer Rouge soldiers, the word *Dac Cong* did not strike fear into their psyche; after all, they had seen worse and they, too, had trained in such trade.

The next day, the Khmer Rouge ambush destroyed two trucks and killed a number of KPRA soldiers.<sup>100</sup> The other two trucks were able to escape the ambush and then contacted nearby units for reinforcement. What was more interesting was that the local KPRA militias learnt of the ambush and, on their own initiative, moved to the site to help their comrades. Unfortunately for them, their arrival on the scene coincided with the arrival of the other KPRA reinforcement that the *Dac Cong* company had called earlier. The Khmer Rouge soldiers had long gone from the scene, but the KPRA reinforcement was unaware of this, and thought that the KPRA militias were an underground Khmer Rouge network who had attacked the convoy. A combination of suspicions and confusion led the reinforcement, some of which were composed of Vietnamese units, to arrest the KPRA militias.

From Vietnam's point of view, it was nearly impossible to determine who was Khmer Rouge and who was not. The investigation then widened and reached up from the hamlets to the provincial level. Under violent interrogation, which perhaps the interrogators thought justified after the savage ambush on their comrades, the militias then spuriously blamed other people. Those other people then blamed the upper echelons and soon, most of the province was under suspicion of collaborating with the Khmer Rouge.

Naturally, one cannot find mention of such events in the official publication of the KPRA at the time. The accounts of what happened next came only from interviews and the publications of the CGDK. One of the most comprehensive accounts at the time was the KPNLF bulletin, which appeared on 5 August 1983.<sup>101</sup> It seemed that the purge had not yet run its course, even four months after the event. The KPNLF bulletin claimed that the following figures were arrested by the PAVN: the governor and deputy governor of Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey; commander of the Siem Reap PMC; political commissar of the Siem Reap PMC; and a high-profile local party official. The KPRA's oral accounts corroborated this claim, as also did the reports from the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.<sup>102</sup> The majority of the party officials in the Kralanh and Srey Snom districts (where the event occurred) were also purged. Without resolution on this issue, the PAVN

simply could not launch any serious campaign along the border against the CGDK. The 1983 dry season offensive did indeed produce results, but these could never be considered to have been decisive.

It was not until late 1983 that the PAVN began to realize the flaws of its investigation and accepted that their suspicions were baseless. In a move that was surprising to some observers, the PAVN Supreme Headquarters in Cambodia then moved to shake up the command structure of Front 479 that had handled the investigation. Some claimed that the commander of Front 479 was transferred to an administrative job at the Tan Son Nhut airfield in Saigon and several mid-rank commanders had their future promotion rescinded.<sup>103</sup>

At an official conference in Japan in 2012, the author met a Vietnamese officer whose father happened to be a colonel of Front 479 during that purge. The officer went so far as to claim that his father refused further promotion after realizing the errors of his ways. What was even more interesting was that the colonel was part of a second special forces team that the PAVN had sent to rescue Prince Sihanouk in January 1979. The first team was decimated by the Khmer Rouge and the second team decided to abort the operation, according to this account.

It is not easy to truly assess whether and how much the Vietnamese regretted the event and what they did to their innocent Cambodian comrades. What was clear, however, was that the event was a huge embarrassment for the PAVN in Cambodia and it also prevented the PAVN from making the 1983 dry season offensive a decisive one. This is because in order to make the campaign decisive, the PAVN needed to ensure that the PRK could govern what was liberated from the CGDK. The purge denied the Vietnamese such an opportunity. Perhaps because of this reason, the 1983 campaign appeared to satisfy other moderate objectives, namely, the containment of CGDK activities, probing attacks to learn about the CGDK border camps, and finally the test of Thailand's resolve in the event of a Thai–Vietnamese clash.

The Siem Reap purge also saw the PAVN replacing a senior commander of Front 479 with Major General Phung Dinh Am who, according to his autobiography, had fought wars in Cambodia for three generations.<sup>104</sup> One could only wonder if the PAVN had decided to appoint someone who had more history of interactions with Cambodian soldiers and people in order to make sure nothing like the purge, or its origins, would ever happen again.

There was also re-organization of the resistance movements. The Khmer Rouge was still not amendable to working with the non-communists, and vice versa. The KPNLAF and the ANS, however, became closer. After the flawed 1982 Liberation Plan was abandoned in the face of the fierce PAVN offensive, General Dien Del returned to the border and assumed his previous position. On the ANS side, General In Tam (former premier under Prince Sihanouk in the 1960s) was blamed for the loss of the two ANS camps in 1983, and was relieved of his duty as commander of the ANS.<sup>105</sup> He was

replaced by General Teap Ben who analysts saw as more amendable to working with the KPNLAF.<sup>106</sup> Kong Sileah, founder of the MOULINAKA died under mysterious circumstances in 1980 and was replaced by Nhem Sophon, who was also thought to be open to working with the KPNLAF.

On the KPNLAF side, many people also wanted to join the ANS in building some form of coalition to counter the Khmer Rouge. One of the prime movers for this idea was Abdul Gaffar Peang-Meth who was formerly secretary to President Son Sann. This did not please the President as he was not enamored of the idea of a joint command. Such a structure would erode more of Son Sann's authority as a joint military command would need to have some independent power in decision-making to respond to battlefield contingencies. According to some accounts, Abdul Gaffar was appointed by President Son Sann as the CGDK's ambassador to Egypt, an attempt to get Abdul Gaffar away from the border and paralyze the organization of the joint military command. But the military faction countermanded that decision and kept Abdul Gaffar along the border, claiming the movement needed him on the field.<sup>107</sup> Instead, from 1984 to 1986, Abdul Gaffar was appointed Director of Information and Planning of a joint KPNLAF-ANS military committee called PERMICO (Permanent Military Committee for Coordination). His counterpart in PERMICO was ANS official Tol Lah.

The formation of the PERMICO had its uses, however, especially with regards to the relations between the non-communist resistance and ASEAN in general, and Thailand in particular. The groups started to receive ammunition supplies from the ASEAN countries. With ASEAN's support, PERMICO officials were provided with a safe house in Bangkok, and free access to and from the Khmer-Thai border at all times, especially during the Vietnamese military offensives in 1984 and after.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, these developments came at the expense of the KPNLF, where the rift was now unable to be bridged. The rift would later affect the performance of the PERMICO and its subsequent successor, the Joint Military Command.

### **3.3.4 PAVN's 1984–1985 dry season offensive: the 16-Camps Campaign**

The year 1983 ended with both sides unable to launch significant military operations. The PAVN was preoccupied with the purge of the PRK officials in Siem Reap province, an affair that had turned scandalous. The CGDK was able to regain the camps after the PAVN withdrawal but did not have enough power to launch any decisive campaign. The Khmer Rouge then stepped in and, perhaps by taking advantage of the confusion on the PRK side in Siem Reap, launched an intense guerrilla campaign, which had not been seen since 1979.

In January 1984, Paul Quinn-Judge of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that there was an intensification of Khmer Rouge attacks, which he attributed to the availability of supplies.<sup>109</sup> He also reported the Khmer

Rouge's claim of capturing many provinces during the attacks. The KPRA sources, however, only pointed to one instance where the Khmer Rouge had attacked the Siem Reap provincial capital, but they did not try to hold it.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, the attack was considered a serious embarrassment, and the KPRA yet again replaced the commander of the Siem Reap provincial military command.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps, it seemed that the PAVN had learned the lessons of the purge in 1983 and did not allow that attack to provoke another wave of purges. Only the commander of the provincial military command took the blame, which was an understandable decision. The Khmer Rouge attacks subsided soon after, with Western analysts estimating that the Khmer Rouge lost a total of about four hundred fighters in the short-lived campaign, which was above average in that timeframe.<sup>112</sup>

Once again, the PAVN needed to respond. But as the PAVN started a build-up around the camps that the resistance movements had regained, China stepped in. In April, there was an artillery exchange on Vietnam's northern border as well as regimental level raids.<sup>113</sup> Such skirmishes did nothing to deter Vietnam. On 5 April 1984, elements from the Vietnamese 95th Regiment and the 6th Division formed the first axis of advance while elements from the 201st Regiment and the 302nd Division formed the second axis, and both launched an attack into Thailand.<sup>114</sup> In a surprise move, the Vietnamese forces captured much high ground in Thai territory. In retaliation to this attack, the Chinese restarted shelling into Vietnamese territory to retaliate against what China thought was once again, a Vietnamese expansion in Indochina.<sup>115</sup>

Twelve days later, the Thai 6th Division counterattacked and recaptured the lost territories. The battle was ferocious, with both sides committing tanks and heavy artillery.<sup>116</sup> The attack occurred in an area known as the "Triangle Area," the intersection of the border between Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, further away from the threatened Battambang-Banteay Meanchey province. For the KPRA officers on the ground, however, the attack was rather a feint and Vietnam was clever enough not to fight both Thailand and China at the same time and incur the wrath of the international community.<sup>117</sup>

There was an assumption that Thailand would support the Cambodian resistance movements in the event the Vietnamese attacked the border camps.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps the attack was launched to test Thailand's resolve and reactions as well as probing for the possibility to attack a major FUNCINPEC camp. Located near the Thai village of Tatum, the FUNCINPEC camp also took this namesake, and it housed the FUNCINPEC and ANS headquarters. The camp was located along the Cambodian-Thai border with almost sheer vertical cliffs on the Cambodian side but flat land on the Thai side. Any assault on the camp had to come from Thai territory. Vietnam wanted to know how Thailand would respond and it seemed Thailand did not want to get involved directly unless it was pushed to the wall.

On 15 April 1984, perhaps having learned something about Thailand's intentions, the PAVN shifted its attention to another camp, Banteay Ampil, the headquarters of the KPNLAF. It was estimated that about one thousand soldiers from the PAVN's 75th Division and the 8th Border Regiment participated in the ferocious attack on Banteay Ampil.<sup>119</sup> General Dien Del had built the Banteay Ampil base into a formidable fortification with three lines of defenses, although the lack of heavy support weapons seemed to neutralize some of the protection provided by the three lines. After twenty minutes of relentless assault, the PAVN was able to get through to the second line of defense but it was ultimately beaten back by the KPNLAF counterattack.<sup>120</sup> After one week of action, the battle of Banteay Ampil was over and the inability of the PAVN to capture the base was considered by the senior KPNLF leadership to be a morale boost.<sup>121</sup>

Speaking to the press after the operation was called off, Vietnam's minister of foreign affairs, Nguyen Co Thach played down the negative outcome of the operation by saying that "They are small fish, so the net this year is as small as last year."<sup>122</sup> Vietnam maintained a theme that the operations in the dry season of 1984 were merely police operations along the border and not any attempt to decisively defeat the resistance movement.<sup>123</sup> It seemed that the KPRA was still not mature enough by then. In early August 1984, the ANS had tried to recapture O'Smach by using six hundred soldiers to attack the position that was manned by two battalions of the KPRA.<sup>124</sup> The attack was cut short by instability in the CGDK when, in the same month, Prince Sihanouk expressed his anger and threatened to resign from the presidency of the CGDK over allegations of Khmer Rouge attacks on the ANS.<sup>125</sup>

In summary, during the rainy season of 1984 (from around June to October), both the CGDK and the PAVN were locked in a stalemate with both sides unable to launch major operations. The CGDK, on their part, believed that the PAVN would launch yet another dry season offensive in 1984–1985 and that they would be able to repel the PAVN once again. But by the rainy season of 1984, the KPRA had established four divisions, the 4th Division, the 179th Division, the 196th Division, and the 286th Division. It now seemed that the KPRA was mature enough to take on responsibility for itself.

The PAVN campaign in the dry season offensive of 1984–1985 started as soon as the rain stopped. Even Western analysts were surprised by the unusually early PAVN offensive.<sup>126</sup> After all, in 1983, it was not until January that the PAVN started to fight and in 1984 it was in April, almost at the end of the dry season. As events unfolded, it was clear that the PAVN was ready to end this once and for all in 1984 and 1985.

On 18 November 1984, as the ground was hardening at the beginning of the dry season, the PAVN's largest dry season offensive in Cambodia commenced. The campaign was aptly dubbed "16-Camps Campaign."<sup>127</sup> At the conclusion of the campaign, all sixteen camps belonging to the CGDK,

large and small, were razed to the ground, sending the refugees and the guerrilla fighters into Thailand. The first camp to be hit by this operation was Nong Chan, which housed the KPNLAF's Political Warfare School.<sup>128</sup> In mid-December, the KPNLF lost two medium camps, Baksei and Sok Sann, both of which were located in Pursat province, formerly known as the Southern Zone. On 25 December, the KPNLF lost Nong Samet.

Once again, the Khmer Rouge showed that the time was not ripe for a fixed defense. With expansive underground networks all over the country, the Khmer Rouge did not worry so much about the loss of the camps, perhaps with the exception of the Malai base, which had been the showcase of the Khmer Rouge state structure for the foreign media. In mid-December, a camp in Preah Vihear province called Ta Luan was evacuated and on 4 January, a nearby camp named Paet Um was also evacuated.<sup>129</sup> Phnom Malai, which the Khmer Rouge used as a sanctuary and as a living room to receive foreign guests, media, and dignitaries, was expected to be a tough fight for the PAVN and it was estimated that at least a division would be required to assault the stronghold.<sup>130</sup> To the surprise of many experts, including the Chinese military experts, however, the Khmer Rouge evacuated from Phnom Malai with haste, disabusing everyone of the notion that Phnom Malai would be a bloodbath.<sup>131</sup>

In other words, the faction that was hit the hardest was the KPNLF. It received disproportionate attention when one considers its size in the CGDK. But then, the Khmer Rouge was too elusive and the KPNLF showcased too much of its state structure. It was only logical for the PAVN to concentrate its efforts on the KPNLF. In early January 1985, the long-awaited assault on the KPNLAF headquarters at Banteay Ampil began. The PAVN was reported to have allocated between three to four regiments to the assault, consisting of between 3,500 to 4,000 troops, supported by 20 armored vehicles (including between 12 to 15 T-54 tanks) and 18 artillery pieces.<sup>132</sup> Certainly, this was not a probing attack or police operation. Thailand estimated that seven thousand rounds of artillery fell on Banteay Ampil on the first day of the assault, an artillery bombardment that witnesses reported to have been very accurate, and not many shells fell on Thai territory.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the PAVN had learned well from its previous campaign.

To date, there has never been any published account about the layout of Banteay Ampil's three lines of defense. But one can get a glimpse of the layout in a memoir of a PAVN soldier who had participated in that very assault. A soldier of the 4th Regiment, 5th Division, Front 479, who had participated in the attack recounted:

Scouts said the base was defended by 10,000 gunmen, with 130mm down to the personal rifles . . . Ampil base had altogether three defense lines which were three concentric arcs, far away from each other about eight hundred yards. Each defense line was a wide high earth bank, behind it was four foot deep trench. Along the lines, every fifty yards,

there was a big shelter, with many log layers upon it, the diameter of each log was at least two feet. In addition, there were open gun emplacements for the personal and machine gunners. Between these lines were the minefields.<sup>134</sup>

Artillery was the key to PAVN success. The precise artillery bombardment gave Thailand no reason to intervene. The artillery also suppressed and cut off Banteay Ampil's three lines of defense from reinforcing and supporting each other. Then, in a manner similar to Soviet assault tactics in World War II, following the fierce artillery bombardment that saturated the lines came the tank assault. Some of the PAVN's tanks did fall victim to the anti-tank mines, but most of them got through. In the early morning of 7 January 1985, KPNLAF fighters started to hear the tanks moving in the camp.<sup>135</sup> On that very day, 7 January 1985, the sixth anniversary of the KPSFNS liberation of Phnom Penh, the PAVN and the PRK captured the KPNLAF headquarters.<sup>136</sup>

The 16-Camps Campaign did not conclude until the assault on the FUNCINPEC and ANS headquarters at Tatum (also known as Green Hill, the preferred name used in the ANS bulletin) in March 1985, but the fall of Banteay Ampil was the climax of the campaign. After its headquarters fell, the KPNLAF decided to evacuate Sanro, and the next day, the FUNCINPEC lost O'Bok.<sup>137</sup> On 5 March 1985, the PAVN launched the long-awaited assault on Ta Tum camp, the last major stronghold of the resistance movement. Between the fall of Banteay Ampil and the beginning of the assault on Ta Tum, all other smaller camps had either been evacuated as a precautionary measure, or evacuated after some initial attacks. Ta Tum was the 16th camp, the last prize of the campaign.

Just like the operations in other camps, the assault on Ta Tum started with a vicious artillery bombardment. There was only one tactical problem with attacking Ta Tum. As the cliff was too steep on the Cambodian side, using tanks was not ideal. Even the infantry assault would be extremely difficult. The PAVN then infiltrated into Thai territory to attack the camp from more favorable terrain. Although the attack started on 5 March, it could not be immediately directed towards Ta Tum. Instead, the battle raged for the control of a series of hills inside Thai territory from which the PAVN could use as launching points to attack Ta Tum camp.

On 8 March, it was reported that as many as one thousand PAVN troops had crossed into Thailand.<sup>138</sup> Hundreds were said to have been pushed back into Cambodian territory while the remaining PAVN troops were cut off and had laid mines to try to repel the Thai counterattack.<sup>139</sup> According to Conboy, the PAVN launched a multi-pronged attack on the camp for several days until 8 March, when a fateful artillery round fell on the ANS command bunker and killed King Men, a senior commander of the ANS.<sup>140</sup> Finally, the ANS heeded Prince Sihanouk's call to abandon the camp to avoid a bloodbath.<sup>141</sup> War matériels, fighters and civilians had already been

evacuated from the camp when the PAVN finally broke through. Several days later, Prince Sihanouk personally oversaw the funeral of General King Men.

The assault then became a protracted encounter between the PAVN and the Thai army that continued, on and off, until June 1985. Casualties for both sides were heavy, especially for the PAVN. Conboy noted that the estimates for the PAVN casualties ranged from 125 to 2,000 dead while the ANS suffered only 150 killed and 200 wounded.<sup>142</sup> The casualties on the Thai side were much less. The PAVN did not stay in the camp, however. They knew the operation was more about the symbolic destruction of the “one country, two states” problematic, not the territorial control, at least not at Ta Tum. A former ANS soldier put it bluntly:

[W]hile it was hard to attack Ta Tum from the Cambodian side, the camp was also not an ideal guerrilla camp as we needed to walk at least one day into the interior before coming into contact with any habitable village.<sup>143</sup>

After the operation, the ANS returned and the camp remained an important stronghold for the FUNCINPEC. Nevertheless, the PAVN declared victory with the fall of Ta Tum in March 1985. The PAVN then allowed the soldiers of the KPRA’s 286th Division to march into the ANS headquarter to facilitate a historic photoshoot.<sup>144</sup> The 16-Camps Campaign was concluded.

### *3.3.5 Aftermath of the PAVN’s 1985 dry season offensive*

The 16-Camps Campaign was a turning point for all of the four factions in the Cambodian civil war but also for the Vietnamese. The Khmer Rouge finally did away with relying on fortified camps (with the exception of two camps in Thailand called Site 8 and Site K) and returned to its traditional guerrilla tactics. The KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC also switched to guerrilla tactics, as well as increasing their cooperation. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, had found it timely to transfer responsibilities to the KPRA. This section is concerned with the development within the CGDK while the next chapter will discuss the PAVN and the KPRA.

It became clear after the facts that all of the Vietnamese offensives were mainly aimed at the non-communist groups, particularly the KPNLF. That was only logical. Since the Khmer Rouge was elusive and the KPNLF was the only one that showcased most of the state structures. In a meeting with General Chavalit of Thailand after the 16-Camps Campaign, Pol Pot categorically rejected the notion that the PAVN had gained anything. He was reported to have said, “I’m not worried about losing the border bases. Now I don’t have to look in two directions [to the interior and the frontier] at once.”<sup>145</sup> Pol Pot’s claim seemed quite credible given the fact that the Khmer Rouge activities did not abate after the 1985 offensive. On the

contrary, the NADK now concentrated their effort on Battle Zone 1 and adopted a relentless guerrilla campaign all over the country.

It was around this time that the Khmer Rouge started publishing their political and military bulletin. One should also note that the much-vaunted KPNLF bulletin more or less ceased operation after the 16-Camps Campaign. For the entire year of 1985, the bulletin no longer contained all of its interesting features, and instead, published only international media clippings and whole speeches. Even the photos were in black and white format. The editorial address also changed from Bangkok to New York. It was not until 1986 that the KPNLF with the old, elaborate format returned. Unfortunately for the KPNLF, the first article of the first volume of the 1986 bulletin had an ominous title “Who owns the KPNLF?”<sup>146</sup> The article offered a unifying answer “it belongs to the people,” but the answer was quite unconvincing and instead exposed that the rift within the KPNLF was still not healed. Apparently, the PAVN offensive did not have any unifying effect on the KPNLF.

In contrast, the Khmer Rouge inaugurated their first bulletin in October 1985. The *Bulletin of the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea* (NADK bulletin) appeared bi-monthly and contained colored photos with short captions describing the NADK’s military exploits during the period. In the first volume, the editors published a series of photos to showcase their much-promoted all-female transportation units. In other words, the KPNLF’s resources seemed to dwindle, at least in the immediate aftermath of the 16-Camps Campaign, while the Khmer Rouge was able to avoid the attrition afflicted by the PAVN campaign. After 1985, it became increasingly clear that the Khmer Rouge could easily become the resistance’s dominant military power on the battlefield, boasting a formidable force totaling around thirty thousand armed men, whose combat experience stretched back as far as the 1960s. This threat perhaps united the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC even more than the PAVN did. The plan was then promulgated for the upgrade of cooperation between the non-communist groups. The advocates of such a move would call the two movements (FUNCINPEC and KPNLF) the non-communist resistance.

One notable event in 1985 was when both non-communist forces agreed to pool their military resources and created a Joint Military Command (JMC). In 1985, ANS military commander Gen Teap Ben hand carried to Beijing a document on the creation of the KPNLAF-ANS Joint Military Command to request CGDK President Prince Norodom Sihanouk’s approval.<sup>147</sup> As the name implied, this was not a mere coordination group like the PERMICO, but a full-fledged joint military command, at least on paper. The Prince put his signature on the document, thus formalizing the JMC as the replacement of the PERMICO on 4 January 1986. From 1986 until 1989, the JMC would be manned by both the officers from the ANS and the KPNLAF. General Sak Sutsakhan of the KPNLAF was Commander-in-Chief of the JMC, General Teap Ben of the ANS served as Deputy

Commander-in-Chief and General Toan Chay of the ANS was the Chief of Staff. The JMC had several deputy chiefs of staff from both the KPNLAF and the ANS who co-led different functional branches of the General Staff Headquarters.

In addition, in 1987, Abdul Gaffar Peang-Meth was made Deputy Chief of General Staff of the KPNLAF for Planning and Analysis (PLANA) department. Abdul Gaffar created a special unit called the Armed Political, Psychological, and Clandestine Operations (APPCO), which was to operate as guerrilla units attacking behind the PAVN and KPRA lines. He actually wanted it to remain in place even after the political settlement had been reached between the factions, perhaps using it as a bargaining chip in future power struggles after the war ended.<sup>148</sup> At its inception, the APPCO did not meet with much objection since the resistance groups were still reeling from the effect of the 16-Camps Campaign. When the APPCO fighters were arrested in the interior due to their encumbered gears, thus blowing their cover, the KPNLAF created yet another unit called the Clandestine Operations Service whose main task was sabotage and spreading terror to undermine the PRK's authority.<sup>149</sup> The operatives carried light loads consisting of grenades and other explosives and were credited with several small explosions in Phnom Penh, although the attacks did not kill anyone.<sup>150</sup> It was only fitting to adopt guerrilla tactical doctrine.

But infighting within both the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC sealed the JMC's fate even before it was born. The KPNLAF along the Cambodian-Thai border openly rebelled against President Son Sann and created a parallel movement.<sup>151</sup> This rift was only put under control by Task Force 828 of the Thai army and the American CIA.<sup>152</sup>

The FUNCINPEC did not experience any rift on that scale. This led some disheartened KPNLAF units to defect to the FUNCINPEC and become part of the ANS.<sup>153</sup> Problems between senior commanders meant that the JMC became a place of exile for any commanders who were not liked by senior leaders in their movements. As such, it should come as no surprise that a truly joint military command existed only on paper. The last JMC operational plan was a typed 29-page "Operational Plan of the Non-Communist Resistance Forces for 1989," dated 29 October 1988. The JMC played the ASEAN card and received several thousand weapons and ammunition, training of different sorts from ASEAN, and invaluable political and diplomatic support from sources other than Beijing. But as we shall see later in this chapter, the JMC arrangement at the top did not trickle down to the tactical level when the CGDK launched the final offensive against the PRK in 1989.

Finally, another problem came from the sponsoring countries. Many sponsors such as the Thai Army's Task Force 838 inadvertently exacerbated the problem when they decided to offer financial rewards for success, leading many non-communist rebel forces to fight for money instead of a political ideology. One American advisor noted that many, if not all, non-communist

camps' leaders ruled as warlords and cared little about the people inside, while the Khmer Rouge elected the camp leaders.<sup>154</sup> A last point related to the financing of the non-communist resistance fighters was the multi-layered corruption reportedly perpetuated by the advisors themselves. Some estimated that one third of the CIA money and about half of the Chinese money was lost under the management of the Thai Army.<sup>155</sup>

In retrospect, the establishment of the CGDK and the JMC, while not without contradictions and problems, indeed represented progress for the resistance. First and foremost, it prevented the communist and non-communist rebel forces from attacking each other. Many Khmer Rouge soldiers considered the Serei Ka (Khmer for "freedom fighters," a nickname they gave to the KPNLAF) and the Para (from the word "paratroopers," a name given to the ANS based on the woodland camouflaged uniform they wore) as bandits who would intimidate the local population as much as they fought against the Vietnamese.<sup>156</sup> The Khmer Rouge often attacked both non-communist groups, and only the establishment of the CGDK had mitigated some of that risk.

Over time, however, the Khmer Rouge also operated as vanguard units to facilitate the infiltration of the non-communist forces into the interior.<sup>157</sup> The main problem for the non-communist resistance was that only the Khmer Rouge could maintain an expansive network among the population. Without the Khmer Rouge's acquiescence, it would be next to impossible for the non-communist forces to infiltrate into Cambodia in large formation.

The CGDK mechanism helped alleviate some of these problems. To be fair, not all of the non-communist fighters were opportunists or totally lacking in discipline. Many of them were truly freedom fighters, but many others did originate from the armed groups who profited from the lawless period that reigned over the refugee camps before the political establishment of the resistance movement. To a certain extent, the Khmer Rouge was willing to tolerate the presence of its non-communist forces as long as they did not cause a nuisance to the local population under the protection of the NADK.

Despite all of these hardships, and benefiting from the CGDK and JMC organizations, the KPNLAF and the ANS struggled to build their forces for the eventual offensive that would follow the PAVN withdrawal from Cambodia. They also soon realized, just as the Khmer Rouge also realized, that the 16-Camps Campaign was a blessing in disguise. After all of the camps were razed, the CGDK population was relocated to camps inside Thailand. The KNPLF administered Site II, which was akin to a small city, populated by the civilians of the KPNLF, and the camp was protected by a long stretch of tank ditch to prevent any potential PAVN offensive.<sup>158</sup> General Chavalit of the Thai army also made it clear that any PAVN offensive would be met by an all-out Thai assault. The soldiers of the KPNLF, however, had to leave their families in Site II and move to the KPNLAF headquarters at Klang Dong, a forested area reserved for the

sprawling KPNLAF's military bureaucracy.<sup>159</sup> The men could visit their families in Site II but could not bring any weapons into the camp.

The Khmer Rouge administered Site 8 and Site K while the FUNCINPEC controlled Site B and Ta Tum (also known as Green Hill). Those who were not part of any movement and wanted to go to a third country had to move to Kao-I-Dang, which was administered by the United Nations refugee body, the UNHCR, and was not under the influence of any Cambodian resistance group.

With safe haven secured, the ANS and the KPNLAF now implemented their guerrilla war plan in the interior of Cambodia, as well as building conventional forces for an eventual offensive after the PAVN withdrawal. The three ANS brigades had established two more brigades, all of which were later upgraded to divisions, and by 1989 the ANS had five divisions: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th Division.<sup>160</sup> The ANS also had forces operating deep in the country, the most prominent of which was the 15th Brigade that operated in Kampong Thom province. Using the KPRA's unit as the base, the ANS had an equivalent of five brigades. In 1988, the KPNLAF re-designated its battalions as regiments, although the personnel remained the same.<sup>161</sup> Some claimed that the KPNLAF general staff made this move so it could promote its officers to the same rank as those of the ANS who controlled the regiments, which were, in fact, battalion-size units by KPRA standards.<sup>162</sup>

Starting in 1987, the KPNLAF reorganized itself into conventional units in anticipation of the offensive that would follow the Vietnamese withdrawal. The 16-Camps Campaign saw the abolition of the three-zone system, and all of the forces were re-organized. The KPNLAF created "military regions," planning, perhaps, for the eventual control of a liberated Cambodia.<sup>163</sup> Needless to say, all of the military regions remained at the border even though they were supposed to control provinces throughout Cambodia. In early 1987, the KPNLAF reduced the number of military regions from nine to seven and then changed the name of the units to Operational Military Zone (OMZ).<sup>164</sup> An OMZ controlled a number of regiments, each of which mustered around three hundred fighters. There was a disparity between the OMZs, with some, for example, OMZ4, controlling two regiments, while others, such as OMZ6, controlled four regiments.<sup>165</sup> This disparity was the legacy of the small movements that decided to fuse together to form the KPNLAF. Accordingly, the movement that had large forces had developed into a large OMZ, and small movements could eventually control only the OMZs that had less fighters. Each OMZ was an equivalent of an augmented KPRA's regiment.

According to some estimates, OMZ1 had three regiments (111, 112, and 113) totaling about 500 men; OMZ2 had four regiments (212, 213, 214, and 216) totaling 400 men; OMZ3 had four regiments (311, 312, 313, and 314) totaling about 1,600 men; OMZ4 had three regiments (41, 42, and 43) and one intervention battalion totaling about 1,000 men; OMZ5

had four regiments (511, 512, 513, and 514) totaling 700 men; OMZ6 had four regiments (611, 612, 614, and 615) totaling less than 1,000 men; and OMZ7 had four regiments (711, 713, 714, and 715) totaling 800 men.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, a Special Operational Military Zone was created and was put under the control of the KPNLAF General Staff Headquarters. It had two regiments. The 801st Special Regiment had an intervention battalion and an artillery unit totaling less than 500 men, while the 806th Regiment had about 600 men distributed in three battalions. The 801st, perhaps the most courageous of all, originated from a former Khmer Rouge unit, which may explain its battlefield prowess.<sup>167</sup> The KPNLAF General Staff Headquarters also controlled several commando units (who sported red berets) totaling around 300 men. A final showdown with the KPRA, which we shall turn to in the next chapter, was inevitable.

## Notes

- 1 Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 23.
- 2 Ibid., 29.
- 3 Huy Vannak and Wynne Cougill, *The Khmer Rouge Division 703: From Victory to Self-Destruction* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2003), 15.
- 4 “Statistics of Total Forces,” Document number: L00065, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).
- 5 Dy, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*, 35.
- 6 Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, 60.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានប្រភពតិសាស្សរកយោច្រោយ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកិច្ចយោច្រោយ [History of Preah Vihear Provincial Military Command] (ក្រុងណាយ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គគនៈយោច្រោយនិងកិច្ចការបន្ទេស, ក្រសួងការពាណិជ្ជកម្ម, ២០១២ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012]), 5.
- 9 Nem Sowath, *Civil War Termination and the Source of Total Peace in Cambodia: Win-Win Policy of Samdech Techo Hun Sen in International Context* (Phnom Penh: Reahoo, 2012), 140–144.
- 10 These areas were in the northwestern corner of Cambodia.
- 11 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានប្រភពតិសាស្សរកយោច្រោយ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកិច្ចយោច្រោយ [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command] (ក្រុងណាយ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គគនៈយោច្រោយនិងកិច្ចការបន្ទេស, ក្រសួងការពាណិជ្ជកម្ម, ២០១២ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012]), 8.
- 12 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 300.
- 13 This is not to be confused with the term “rusty iron” in the period after the 1991 political settlement. When used in the post-1991 context, the Khmer Rouge’s “rusty iron” concept denotes the Khmer Rouge’s flexibility to accept a political settlement to destroy the PRK from within, now that everyone was supposed to form a coalition government. This book uses the term “rusty iron” to denote a military strategy before 1991.
- 14 Democratic Kampuchea, *NADK Bulletin*, Vol. 6, August 1986, 10. The original caption in the bulletin had both Khmer and English versions. However, the English version reported in this book is the author’s translation. In the author’s

judgment, the original English version was erroneous because it did not really correspond to the Khmer caption. The following is the original English caption:

The objectives of the NADK have been and continue to be: To carry out with creativeness the new “five-target combat tactics” especially the repeated attacks on the Vietnamese administrative seats in the villages in order to transform the Vietnamese temporarily controlled areas into active guerrilla zones and guerrilla bases.

- 15 This slogan appeared in many volumes of the NADK Bulletin. For an example, see Democratic Kampuchea, *NADK Bulletin*, Vol. 18, August 1988, 21–22. The K-5 Plan was the PRK’s and PAVN’s to build a long fortified wall to close off the Cambodian-Thai border after the CGDK forces were pushed into Thailand in the aftermath of the 1984–1985 dry season offensive. The Khmer Rouge wanted to defeat this strategy by disrupting the sources of labor required to build such a wall. See Chapter 4 for details.
- 16 This was drawn from many official documents that the CGDK produced during that period. See for example, “Press Release from Permanent Delegation of Democratic Kampuchea to UNESCO on August 30, 1986 No 051186,” File: D39195, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).
- 17 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានប្រភពិត្តិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាងចាន់ពេទ្យប៉ែង [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command] (ក្រុងណាយ្យ, កម្ពុជា៖ អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយាងយិនិងកិចចារបទទេស, ភ្នំពេញការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012]), 9.
- 18 “Front” in the Socialist military organization was the largest formation. It was equivalent to the German and American “Army Groups” during World War II that had approximately one to one and a half million troops. For the communist factions in the Cambodian civil war, a Front was equal only to a corps, which was made up of several divisions.
- 19 Democratic Kampuchea, *NADK Bulletin*, vol. 1, October 1985.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Interview with a former commander of the Siem Reap PMC, Siem Reap, 18 June 2012.
- 23 Democratic Kampuchea, *NADK Bulletin*, vol. 11, June 1987.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Interview with a former commander of the Siem Reap PMC, Siem Reap, 18 June 2012.
- 26 Interview with a former officer of the KPRA 4th Division, Takeo, 12 July 2016.
- 27 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានប្រភពិត្តិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាងចាន់ពេទ្យប៉ែង [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 11.
- 28 Ibid., 12.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានប្រភពិត្តិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាងចាន់ពេទ្យប៉ែង [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command] (ក្រុងណាយ្យ, កម្ពុជា៖ អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយាងយិនិងកិចចារបទទេស, ភ្នំពេញការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012]), 5.
- 31 A quote by a former high-ranking ANS commander. See Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 274.
- 32 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានប្រភពិត្តិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាងចាន់ពេទ្យប៉ែង [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 17.

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33 Interview with a former NADK divisional commander, Battambang, 30 December 2013.

34 Ibid.

35 See Thann, *The Khmer People's National Liberation Front*.

36 Ros Chantraboth, *La République Khmère: 1970–1975* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1993), Introduction.

37 Nhek Bun Chhay, *A Luck in Thousand Dangers* (Phnom Penh: [unknown publisher], 1998), 3–17.

38 Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 6. The quote was made by the translator of Mao's book, Samuel Griffith.

39 Thann, *The Khmer People's National Liberation Front*, 23–30. Conboy usually called most of the KPNLF's camp leaders "warlords."

40 អ៊ែង មូលី [Ieng Mouly], ជីវិតលីដូលូបតបនៃទោរសន្តិភាព [Life on the Road to Peace] (Phnom Penh: [unknown publisher], 2013), 414–424.

41 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

42 Interview with a former KPNLAF officer, Phnom Penh, 11 June 2016.

43 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Khmer People's National Liberation Front, *KPNLF Bulletin*, vol. 19, 20 January 1984, 15.

47 Bultmann, *Inside Cambodian Insurgency*, 27.

48 Interview with General Dien Del, Phnom Penh, 4 January 2011.

49 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

50 អ៊ែង មូលី [Ieng Mouly], ជីវិតលីដូលូបតបនៃទោរសន្តិភាព [Life on the Road to Peace], 416–429.

51 Ibid., 362.

52 Ibid.

53 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid. The same accounts were given by Kong Thann in his book, *The Khmer People's National Liberation Front*.

60 Ibid.

61 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 236.

62 Sihanouk, *Prisoners des Khmers Rouges*, 335–338.

63 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 144.

64 Such information can be gleaned from the KPNLF bulletins. Accuracy could be called into question, as well as the question as to whether these institutions had functioned at all. Nevertheless, the more important question is the image of the KPNLF which wanted to portray itself as a state.

65 The claim was obtained from a former aid worker. See Richard Rowat, "Thai/Cambodia Border Refugee Camps 1975–1999 Information and Documentation Website." Accessed 10 January 2015. [www.websitercg.com/border/border-history-1.html](http://www.websitercg.com/border/border-history-1.html).

66 Camille Scalabrino, Ben Kiernan, Steve Heder, Michael Vickery, Pierre Brocheux, Joel Luguern, Marie-Claire Orieux, Alain Rustenholz, and Serge Thion, *Cambodge: History et Enjeux*, 1945–1985 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985), 204–220.

67 Interview with a former KPNLAF battalion commander, Banteay Meanchey, 13 July 2016.

68 លេង មូលី [Leng Mouly], ជីវិតលើផ្លូវបែកបន់ទៅការសន្តិភាព [Life on the Road to Peace], 442–445.

69 Ibid.

70 Interview with a former KPNLAF battalion commander, Banteay Meanchey, 13 July 2016.

71 Scalabrino et al., *Cambodge: Histoire et Enjeux*, 204–220.

72 Ibid

73 Ibid.

74 Nguyễn Văn Hồng, *Cuộc chiến bắt buộc* [The Obligated War] (Nhà xuất bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, Hanoi, 2008 [Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 2008]). The author of this book was a retired colonel who had served under Front 479. The author would like to thank Captain Tran Duc Huong (of the People's Army of Vietnam), the author's classmate at the US Army Command and General Staff College for assisting with parts of the translation of the book.

75 For instance, as part of the effort, Democratic Kampuchea's infamous S-21 prison was preserved and turned into a genocidal museum. Here too, Pol Pot's policy of secrecy kept the workers in the prison in the dark until the last days of the regime. When the Vietnamese came in, the workers had no time to destroy the evidence and they largely remained intact.

76 This was the title of a publication of a historical-demographic book in the 1960s by a right-wing scholar. The book's major prediction was that as the Vietnamese expansionism reached the sea after it controlled Cochinchina, Vietnam had no choice but to expand westward, i.e. into Cambodia.

77 Nhek, *A Luck in Thousand Dangers*, 15.

78 លេង មូលី [Leng Mouly], ជីវិតលើផ្លូវបែកបន់ទៅការសន្តិភាព [Life on the Road to Peace], 416–429.

79 Peter Schier, “An Interview with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, 1st December, 1983,” *SUDOSTASIEN aktuell*, (January, 1984), 84–90.

80 Scalabrino et al., *Cambodge: Histoire et Enjeux*, 204–220.

81 Rodney Tasker, “Battle on the Border,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 February 1983.

82 Ibid.

83 Paul Quinn-Judge, “Time for a Timetable,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 March 1983.

84 Nhek, *A Luck in Thousand Dangers*, 15–18.

85 Tasker, “Battle on the Border.”

86 John McBeth, “The Border Erupts,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 14 April 1983.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Quinn-Judge, “Time for a Timetable.”

92 McBeth, “The Border Erupts.”

93 Nayan Chanda, “A Symbolic Offensive,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 May 1983.

94 Paul Quinn-Judge, “Coalition Coalesced,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 January 1984.

95 Hồng, *Cuộc chiến bắt buộc* [The Obligated War].

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96 វិទ្យាល័យបានប្រភពគិតិសាស្ត្រកម្មយាន [Institute of Military History], ឬវរក្តិយានៗ គិតិស្សមកប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 8.

97 Interview with a former KPRA officer of the Banteay Meanchey PMC, Siem Reap, 21 June 2013.

98 David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959–1968* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 48.

99 Interview with a former KPRA officer of the Banteay Meanchey PMC, Siem Reap, 21 June 2013.

100 Ibid.

101 Khmer People's National Liberation Front, *KPNLF Bulletin*, vol. 11, 5 August 1983, 8.

102 The KPRA's account corroborated this claim (Interview with a former commander of the Siem Reap PMC, Siem Reap, 18 June 2012.). The *Far Eastern Economic Review*, using several guerrilla sources, claimed that on 3 August, the Vietnamese had purged around three hundred PRK officials. See "Intelligence" section, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 August 1983.

103 Interview with a former KPRA officer of the Banteay Meanchey PMC, Siem Reap, 21 June 2013.

104 ក្រុង ខ្លួន អ៊ិម [Phung Dinh Am], ហត្ថលេខាបន្ទូនទៅការអងគគេ បីជំនាញ [Bakung, Brigadier General Phung Dinh Am, Connecting with Three Generations of the Land of Angkor], (Phnom Penh: [unkown publisher]), 2009.

105 Quinn-Judge, "Coalition Coalesced."

106 Ibid.

107 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

108 Ibid.

109 Paul Quinn-Judge, "Vietnam Takes Aim," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 March 1984. Quinn-Judge seemed unaware of the effect of the purge in Siem Reap that led to the increase in Khmer Rouge attacks.

110 Ibid.

111 Interview with a former commander of the Siem Reap PMC, Siem Reap, 18 June 2012.

112 Quinn-Judge, "Vietnam Takes Aim."

113 Paul Quinn-Judge, "Peking Tit-for-Tat: China Strikes Out at Vietnam in Retaliation for an Incursion into Thailand," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 April 1984.

114 John McBeth, "Raid into Thailand: The Thai Military Recaptures a Strategically Important Hill, 12 Days After it was Occupied by Vietnamese Forces," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 April 1984.

115 Ibid. In the same volume, see Paul Quinn-Judge, "Peking's Tit-for-Tat."

116 Ibid. See Section "Intelligence."

117 វិទ្យាល័យបានប្រភពគិតិសាស្ត្រកម្មយាន [Institute of Military History], ឬវរក្តិយានៗ គិតិព្រះវិហារ [History of Preah Vihear Provincial Military Command], 8.

118 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of Kampuchea, *Undeclared War Against the People's Republic of Kampuchea*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of Kampuchea Department of journalism and information, 1986.

119 John McBeth, "A Rude Awakening," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 April 1984.

120 Ibid.

121 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

122 John McBeth, "Small Fish Off the Hook," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 May 1984.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

125 Rodney Tasker, "Stabbed in the Back," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 August 1984.

126 Paul Quinn-Judge, "Christmas Assault: Hanoi Launches an Early Dry-Season Offensive Along the Thai-Cambodian Border But Worries About Andropov's Peking Visit," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 January 1985.

127 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រានុវត្តិការស្តីកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], ឃុំវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រានុវត្តិការស្តីកម្មយោច ២ [History of the 2nd Infantry Division] (ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាន នយោបាយនិងការបង្រៀនបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ភ្នំពេញ ២០១៣ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]), 19.

128 Quinn-Judge, "Christmas Assault."

129 John McBeth and Paul Quinn-Judge, "Vietnamese Forces Overrun a Key Guerrilla Headquarters: The Fall of Ampil," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 January 1985.

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131 Paul Quinn-Judge, "Blessing Well Disguised: The Cambodian Resistance Needs Battlefield Success Against Hanoi to Restore Credibility in the UN," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 July 1985.

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133 Ibid.

134 Nguyen Thanh Nhan, *Away From Home Season: The Story of a Vietnamese Volunteer Veteran in Cambodia* (lulu.com, 2010), 57.

135 McBeth and Quinn-Judge, "Vietnamese Forces Overrun a Key Guerrilla Headquarters."

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149 Thann, *The Khmer People's National Liberation Front*, 150–151.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., 136–139.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 248.

155 Ibid., 251–252.

156 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រានុវត្តិការស្តីកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], ឃុំវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រានុវត្តិការស្តីកម្មយោច ៣ [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 3.

157 Ibid.

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159 Interview with a former KPNLAF battalion commander, Banteay Meanchey, 13 July 2016.

160 Nhok, *A Luck in Thousand Dangers*, 28.

161 Ibid., 245–246.

162 វឌ្ឍយាសុចិនបន្ទីរក្រុតិសាស្ត្ររក្សាទិន្នន័យ [Institute of Military History]. បុរីក្រុតិយាជ្ញេវ  
ពេទបន្ទីរក្សាទិន្នន័យ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military  
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ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department  
of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012], 14.

163 Ibid., 15.

164 Ibid., 16.

165 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 245.

166 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.

167 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 264.

## 4 The People's Republic of Kampuchea

When in doubt, apply  
People's War

### 4.1 The PAVN's Cambodian contingent: the Vietnamese Volunteer Army

The Vietnamese maintained a structure more or less similar to the PAVN units that operated during the Vietnam War. A typical division would have on average ten thousand men with organic armor and artillery support. When it came into Cambodia, however, the PAVN called itself the Vietnamese Volunteer Army in order to justify its intervention. The Vietnamese and the PRK used the names “PAVN” and “Vietnamese Volunteer Army” interchangeably. But in this book, to avoid confusion resulting from an acronym overload, the Vietnamese army will be simply referred to as PAVN.

The PAVN fielded two types of divisions in Cambodia. The first type was the typical divisions, having one, two, or three-digit numerical designation. For a lack of better terms and for the sake of simplicity, this book shall call these units “mobile divisions.” The second type of divisions can be tentatively called “local-governance military expert group” (*quân sự địa phương như đoàn*), which was identified by a four-digit numerical designation.<sup>1</sup> This was a military formation the size of a division, but their task was exclusively nation-building.<sup>2</sup>

These latter units never moved outside of the province like the mobile divisions, and they typically had a battalion at each district and a company at each village; the size of the garrisoned unit varied depending on the different size of the districts and villages. In Cambodia, unit 7701 stationed in Kampong Thom province (also responsible for Preah Vihear province), unit 7704 stationed in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey province, and unit 7705 stationed in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.2 The Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA)

During one of the meetings in the negotiation rounds in 1990, Khieu Samphan from the Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) faction told the press, “We [Democratic Kampuchea] have shown our understanding to let

the ‘Puppet’ [People’s Republic of Kampuchea] to join the SNC [Supreme National Council of Cambodia].” Not wanting the insult to go unpunished, Premier Hun Sen of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea promptly replied, “I am so ‘thankful’ for the understanding from the ‘Murderers.’ ”<sup>4</sup> The exchange actually summed up the antagonism and hostility between the factions of the Cambodian Civil War very well.

When the Kampuchean People’s Solidarity and National Salvation Armed Forces liberated Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, the new state, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), was established. The state was controlled by the resurrected Kampuchea People’s Revolutionary Party—its official establishment date was set to be 1951—and had an army, the Kampuchea People’s Revolutionary Army (KPRA). The KPRA had three main echelons.

The first echelon was the mobile division, called the “sharp troop” (a transliteration from the Khmer term “*toap srouch*”). The KPRA General Staff Headquarters in Phnom Penh maintained control of these units. The second echelon was the territorial troops, controlled by “Regions,” which were later transformed into “Military Regions” (MR), of which there were five in 1989. The MR controlled several provincial military commands (PMC), which managed operations in their respective provinces. The PMCs were organized as conventional formations, but they did not have organic artillery or armor and fought primarily as infantry units. The MR controlled intervention units as well as armor units and heavy artillery. The third echelon of the KPRA was the paramilitary units consisting of office militias (protecting government offices), fishing lot militias (in the Tonle Sap Lake area), the defense militias (protecting the key infrastructure such as railroad lines and bridges), the village militias, and the hamlet militias.<sup>5</sup> An estimate of the total forces in 1987 is shown in Table 4.1 (page 127).

#### *4.2.1 Mobilization strategy and concept of operations*

Following the communist tradition, there was a tendency of the party to control every aspect of military life. The Ministry of Homeland Defense controlled all military matters, while the General Staff Headquarters was in charge of operational matters. The general staff was under the ministry, and the chief of general staff concurrently held the position of first deputy minister of homeland defense. In a manner not different from the Khmer Rouge forces, the KPRA officer did not have formal ranks, and the officers were usually known by their positions, such as “comrade battalion commander.” The second communist influence was the role of the political officer or political commissar. In each unit, there is a position called “political commander” who was in charge of the political direction in the unit. Despite having the same rank as the operational commander, the political commander usually did not involve himself in operational matters, but he was the bearer of the party’s message, maintained unit discipline, rallied the troops and the populations, and countered enemy infiltration.

The KPRA functioned around a concept called “*pror-long pror-naing*,” which can literally be translated as “friendly competition.” In this concept, promotions and rewards were based on the friendly competitions among different units as well as within unit.<sup>6</sup> The political commander and the commander of the higher unit were the record keepers. The friendly competition centered on three interrelated areas: fighting the enemy, building the unit, and political and ethical integrity.<sup>7</sup>

Just like any other units, fighting the enemy either through ambushes, defense, deliberate attacks and rallying of the bystanders all counted in this category. Second, and related to rallying, the unit was expected to maintain its integrity, morale, as well as self-sufficiency through good rapport with the population. Third, within the unit itself the soldiers and officers were vetted by the political officer as to their personal characters and ethical principles, especially their conduct towards the local population. This concept did not only apply to the regular units but also the territorial troops as well as the militias forces.

Within the KPRA, in many instances of extraordinary individual heroism, the officer or soldier would receive the highest distinction of all, the “hero” (*virak tchunn*) designation. Throughout the war, many people would receive this distinction, including many militia troops who outnumbered the award recipients from the conventional units. In expectation of the offensive to come from the resistance, the KPRA published in the *People's Army* newspaper the names of ten soldiers who had received the highest distinction, the “Hero medal.” At least five of them came from the militias, and most eventually switched service to the conventional divisions.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, the *People's Army* newspaper struggled with insufficient means to produce comic strip images to recount the episodes that led these officers to receive the hero designation.

As a former KPRA officer noted, after the Khmer Rouge regime, everyone had almost nothing in their possession, and as a result, they worried less about financial rewards, unlike the non-communist factions of the CGDK.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the KPRA officers were faced with an existential threat—the Khmer Rouge—and that was a great motivation for them to fight. One of the reasons why the PRK could succeed in building a strong state was its ability to blend the anti-Khmer Rouge propaganda with the friendly competition concept to build a strong army, at least in the early period of the war.

#### **4.2.2 *The armed propaganda units and the dual-duty companies***

The party's tendency to assume control of everything to the lowest organizational level possible fits perfectly with the concept of “People's War,” which calls for general mobilization of the population. The KPRA taught the soldiers, officers, and political cadres, the concept of 5-in-1 villager: “a villager is a soldier, a policeman, a propagandist, a producer, and an

intelligence agent.”<sup>10</sup> The KPRA’s policy also integrated all military and paramilitary forces under one umbrella.

With the support of Vietnamese local-governance military expert groups, around 1980, the central committee of the Kampuchea People’s Revolutionary Party sent small teams called the “armed propaganda units,” a direct copy of the Viet Minh’s unit by the same name, to each province to build similar teams. The main mission was to spread the party’s propaganda as well as building local government structure at the village level and above. The Vietnamese mobile divisions also assisted the territorial troops of the KPRA in launching many operations (usually identified with the prefix “C” such as C80 in Siem Reap province) to extend the PRK’s influence beyond the provincial capital. They organized elections in order to build the local governments. The armed propaganda units then recruited people to defend the hamlets and villages.

Between 1984 and 1985, the armed propaganda units recruited enough people to upgrade themselves into larger units. Thus, the armed propaganda units became the “dual-duty companies” (in Khmer, “*koor pi pheara-kej*”).<sup>11</sup> As the name implied, the latter was set up as a company at the district level and conducted two main missions: fighting and spreading propaganda; in essence, the reproduction and augmentation of the armed propaganda units.

A former KPRA officer explained the choice: at the hamlet and village level, the forces were paramilitary in nature and therefore could not be expected to sustain long-term operations, which required the ability to fight during their mission of spreading the propaganda.<sup>12</sup> At the province, however, the KPRA had battalions, which were too cumbersome to move to different places. Consequently, the district’s company was a good compromise. The company could fight as a conventional unit, yet it was small enough to move around for its propaganda missions. In most cases, a district would have had more than one company because one of them was expected to be a dual-duty company. In cases where the district population could not support more than one company, one of the platoons in that company would become the dual-duty platoon.

By continuing to adhere to the “5-in-1 villager” slogan (a villager is a soldier, a policeman, a propagandist, a producer, and an intelligence agent), the dual-duty companies continued to sustain their propaganda and recruited more people to serve in the provincial battalions. As soon as a battalion was raised, the province was expected to contribute it to the mobile divisions as required. The mobile divisions received most of their reinforcements from the PMCs this way, as a conscription law did not exist until 1988. The PMCs contributed a lot of troops to the mobile divisions but still retained a far more substantial force in its order of battle. Provinces in the eastern part of the country such as Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, and Prey Veng had more people but less Khmer Rouge threat, and in 1989 these provinces contributed many battalions and regiments to the western provinces.

#### **4.2.3 Indoctrination**

Following the People's War model in the communist tradition, the KPRA's penchant towards indoctrination was very strong. Indoctrination of the KPRA was applied at three main levels. The first level was the special program prepared by the central committee of the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party for the newly appointed commanders. The program was not regular in that it depended on the number of new commanders who would assume responsibility.

The second level of indoctrination was embedded with the specialized schools for the armed forces. The Ministry of Homeland Defense maintained a series of specialized schools such as infantry, artillery, armor, etc. Within each school, there was always a special section for the political study. The *People's Army* often made references to this kind of indoctrination. The existence of such a course was first recorded in the first issue of the *People's Army* on October 1979 (Phnom Penh was liberated in January 1979).<sup>13</sup> But the newspaper mentioned that the October course was already a second session and was taught to officers in the General Staff Headquarters, division commanders, provincial military commanders, and battalion commanders.<sup>14</sup> The course was held at the Ministry of Homeland Defense's infantry school.

The third level of indoctrination occurred at the local level. In the preceding section, we have seen the development of the dual-duty companies, which were later upgraded into battalions and regiments. The units' main role was propaganda, among itself and the people. In addition to these units, each KPRA unit also had a position called "political commander." The political commander did not involve himself in the operational matters and only dealt with political affairs such as indoctrination and morale building.<sup>15</sup> Because indoctrination was his only job, one can certainly expect the political commander to carry out his indoctrination program on a regular basis.<sup>16</sup> That is what all bureaucrats who are concerned with maintaining their relevance would do.

Therefore, because of this institution of the "political commander," one can expect indoctrination to occur systematically and on a regular basis. The official history of the Siem Reap provincial military command mentioned that a political commander existed at the company level while the platoon had a "political assistant."<sup>17</sup> Official history of the Battambang-Banteay Meanchey provincial military command corroborated this view.<sup>18</sup>

##### **4.2.3.1 Indoctrination in action**

There are indeed two major challenges regarding the study of political programs, namely the actual implementation of the political program (and indoctrination) and issues about effectiveness. First of all, while the programs described in the preceding section were the largest indoctrination programs that the KPRA had conducted, a question arises as to whether or

not such programs were carried out by units in the field, or by the officers once they left the school. Unfortunately, there are no comprehensive statistics available regarding this issue. In fact, even the books by Western scholars, such as Slocomb's *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, did not include even anecdotes concerning the propaganda efforts of the KPRA at the local level. However, such information does exist in the *People's Army* newspaper, although perhaps due to the language barrier, this information has never been examined.

This book will therefore examine the primary data available in the *People's Army* newspaper. Instead of examining all articles, which would generate many similar stories and data, this book will analyze model articles in the newspaper during three crucial periods: 1980, 1985, and 1989. In 1980, the KPRA had just begun to liberate the country from the Pol Pot regime, and its main mission was popular mobilization, i.e. indoctrination, fighting the enemy, and saving the people from hunger.<sup>19</sup> Thus, 1980 is a test as to whether the army had really performed these non-military missions of indoctrination and rescuing the people from hunger. In 1985 the PAVN had just launched the 16-Camps Campaign, which pushed major CGDK's units into Thailand. This period is marked by a relative increase in the conventional military operations, which could be expected to eclipse the political works of the KPRA. Thus, this is a second test as to whether the KPRA remained faithful to its political missions at a time when the conventional military operations were more demanding. Lastly, the year 1989 (and 1990 and 1991) was the final year of the PRK, and the question is whether the PRK had achieved anything from its political work throughout the years in preparation for the resistance onslaught.

The next question is the effectiveness question. How do we know if those propaganda and indoctrination programs worked? How do we know if the population changed its mind? And if so, do we know why the population changed its mind? These "effectiveness" questions are about assessing people's opinions. And even in recent events where the data is available, determining the dynamic of people's opinion is a difficult issue. Thus, the major challenge that faces this book is to answer these questions from the time when data is scarce, if not unavailable altogether.

Fortunately, the *People's Army* newspaper did make assessments of political programs, and these provide many clues as to the effectiveness of the political approach to fighting a People's War. In the subsequent section, this book will attempt to describe simultaneously both what the KPRA achieved in terms of indoctrination, and also the possible results of these achievements. Before we analyze the data, one has to bear in mind that the information came from the KPRA's official newspaper, the *People's Army*. This book does not pretend that there was no propaganda in the stories. Yet, as it was the best evidence available on political indoctrination, this book will present the data as is and will appraise it at the end of the section.

#### 4.2.3.2 1980: *the military governed*

In 1980 Cambodian society was just slowly emerging from genocide and famine on a large scale. As evidenced by countless articles in the *People's Army* newspaper, the KPRA then was ordered to help the people whenever it could, in addition to pure military tasks. The military was also in charge of building and protecting the local authority in places where, in 1980, such structures were not in existence due to the fact that the Khmer Rouge had destroyed them when it was in power from 1975 to 1979.<sup>20</sup> Election did occur, even though there was no opposition to the PRK's candidates who would run against each other.<sup>21</sup> The KPRA's official unit history noted that in many rural villages, election was not possible due to the Khmer Rouge threat and the KPRA and the PAVN had to launch low-intensity operations to maintain security for the election to occur.<sup>22</sup> According to Slocomb, the local officials were people indigenous to the villages and did not necessarily have any relations to the Vietnamese or connections with officials in Phnom Penh.<sup>23</sup>

In one particular village north of the Pursat provincial capital, for example, the army claimed that improved security had allowed more people to move into the villages, and that the population increased from 23 to 363 households in less than one year.<sup>24</sup> Since July 1979, each soldier in almost every unit nationwide had allocated at least one kilogram of rice out of his or her individual allowance (approximately 5 percent of the total individual allowance) to give to the local population every month.<sup>25</sup> In some places such as Saeb village in Kampong Trolach district (Kampong Chhnang province), the 3rd Company of the 6th Battalion of the KPRA had spent fifteen days to help the people with agricultural work.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the 19th Battalion in Kampong Thom helped the people with the harvest as well as sharing its food with the people.<sup>27</sup> The unit also ordered its soldiers to maintain good relations with the local government and the militias.

In some cases, the description was meticulous. For example, the 33rd Battalion in Kampong Cham province reported that it had helped the people with the harvest, and also with the repair of people's houses.<sup>28</sup> The *People's Army* reported that even a conventional unit, such as the 4th Division, had shared its food with approximately four thousand people who lived within the unit's area of operations.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the newspaper reported that Takeo PMC had helped the people in the cultivation and harvest of around one hundred hectares of land, while maintaining its conventional operations against the enemy and enhancing indoctrination.<sup>30</sup> The Ministry of Homeland Defense bestowed upon the PMC many medals for such achievements.

The participation of conventional units in these non-military tasks was not strange. The "E" armored unit shared with the people 1,300 kilograms of the vegetable that it had grown in the first nine months of 1980, while also having repaired nineteen of the people's houses, and constructed 8,000 meters of road for the community.<sup>31</sup> The 2nd Battalion in Kampong Speu

and the 18th Battalion in Battambang both allocated rice for poor people as well as helping them with the harvest of their crops without charging them any money.<sup>32</sup> As division “S” (a code name that based on the description, might have meant the 4th Division) moved from Kampong Chhnang to the border between Battambang and Pursat, it had performed three main tasks: rice allocation for poor people, assistance for the people’s agricultural work, and conducting indoctrination lessons for the local militias.<sup>33</sup> The 7th and 9th Battalions of the 1st Brigade (which later became the 196th Division) had helped to harvest twenty hectares of the people’s land in November, and allocated two hundred and fifty kilograms of rice to one hundred poor families who could not support themselves.<sup>34</sup> After this assistance, the units also conducted indoctrination sessions.

These are summaries of what the KPRA units did in terms of popular mobilization in 1980. Later in the year, the *People’s Army* did not give any specific data on the effectiveness of these actions, but it did note that soldier recruitment surpassed the targets in Kampong Speu, Koh Kong, and Kampong Thom. The newspaper attributed these successes, based on the interviews with the local military units, to political programs and popular mobilization.<sup>35</sup>

Also in 1980, the KPRA began to implement an amnesty program for the defectors. The first instance of such action was mentioned when the *People’s Army* described the activities of the 7th Battalion, which also included monthly political works within the unit, lectures, self-criticism sessions, and the lessons-learned sessions.<sup>36</sup> But the unit also conducted works related to what was known as the “Lost,” i.e. those who have lost their way and joined the CGDK.<sup>37</sup> The political works, according to the *People’s Army*, allowed the unit to convince an unspecified number of the “Lost” to return to live in society and the reception of the Lost was conducted in a formal ceremony.<sup>38</sup> In 1980, the policy regarding the “Lost” was in its infancy, but during 1984 and 1985, this policy became a major political strategy.

The *People’s Army* newspaper frequently ran individual stories of defectors, the “Lost’s story.” These articles typically gave a brief version of the defector’s biography and then recounted how he or she joined the resistance groups, and then what prompted him or her to return. What was special when the *People’s Army* used the term “Lost,” was the meaning that these people had defected without a fight. Sometimes, such defections occurred right at the end of the indoctrination sessions. Sometimes, it was their families who had joined the indoctrination lessons and then convinced the “Lost” to return from the resistance’s jungle bases. The *People’s Army* distinguished this group from those who “surrendered on the battlefield,” meaning post-battle defection.<sup>39</sup> This book does not count such post-battle defections, because such behavior might have been influenced by the outcome of the battle, rather than the result of propaganda. Only the defectors in the “Lost” category will give a better measurement of the effects of propaganda and indoctrination.

#### 4.2.3.3 1985: *war on the fringes, indoctrination in the interior*

The “Lost” program maintained its relevance well into 1985. One article, in particular, recounted a curious chain of events that is significant from the standpoint of this book. In March 1985, the *People's Army* ran an article about the defection of two former resistance fighters named Keth Chhum and Buth Ven.<sup>40</sup> Both joined the resistance because of three CGDK's propaganda messages: Vietnamese invasion, Vietnamese would kill all Cambodians who did not run away, and there was treasure (i.e. materialistic attraction) in the jungle.<sup>41</sup> When they joined, however, there was a severe lack of food, and the resistance seemed to be more interested in looting than in achieving any higher ideological goal. Both men cited these problems as the reasons why they defected.<sup>42</sup>

What is perhaps more interesting is how the article explained the causal effects of propaganda. The article started by describing the PRK's propaganda messages, which included three things: good people-army relations, preventing Pol Pot from returning to power, and the indoctrination of the “Marxist-Leninist ideology.”<sup>43</sup> However, when the same article explained why the two men defected to the KPRA, the two men cited the uneasiness with “Pol Pot's soldiers,” KPRA's good conduct towards the people, and the fact that previous defectors were not harmed or even arrested by the KPRA.<sup>44</sup> Curiously, the indoctrination of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which was a significant ideological message, was not counted among the reasons why the two men defected. The anti-Pol Pot ideology and the good people-army relations seemed to be the only reasons for defection. Stories like this are prone to manipulation and biases. However, this discrepancy might actually suggest that the interview with the two men was genuine and that the staff somehow failed to fabricate the story to include the Marxist-Leninist ideology indoctrination in the list of effective propaganda tools. Many other stories in the *People's Army* bear resemblance to this story.

Another of the *People's Army* articles in 1985 recounted a story of a man who had conducted business with the resistance guerrillas and later joined them out of fear of revenge from the KPRA.<sup>45</sup> However, the man decided to defect when he learned about the KPRA's leniency towards the defectors as well as hearing the word “Pol Pot” in his first meeting with the guerrillas: these guerrillas turned out to be the Khmer Rouge (which implied that his fear of Pol Pot led him to defect).<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in another defector's article, the *People's Army* reported on the relationship between the wife and the husband as the reason for defection.<sup>47</sup> In that story, the husband decided to defect because the conditions of life in the resistance's jungle camp were bad while he was separated from his wife and newborn baby who lived in the village under PRK's control.<sup>48</sup> In this case, it seems the propaganda focused more on things that the individuals could relate to, rather than some abstract ideology such as the Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The amnesty program was not the only program that flourished in 1985. The PRK also expanded its political indoctrination programs. At the national

level, in order to make sure that the anti-Pol Pot propaganda persisted in people's minds and the collective memory, the PRK had organized an annual event to condemn the Khmer Rouge regime and the genocide that occurred during that time. The event was held annually on 20 May, the anniversary of the establishment of the "cooperatives" by the Khmer Rouge regime (20 May 1976), commonly understood to be the main cause of famine and mass killing.<sup>49</sup> The first time such an event was described in meticulous detail was in a *People's Army* article in May 1985.

The event was called "*Ti Vea Jorng Kom Heung*" or "Vengeful Remembrance Day," or "Day of Hatred," or more literally, "The Day to Remain Tied to Hatred," during which time, the state officials prepared religious ceremonies, making political speeches and more importantly the participants recounted their stories under the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>50</sup> The story-telling by the victims and their relatives eventually led other participants to remember their relatives and family members who were killed during the Khmer Rouge regime, which inevitably brought about a strong emotional reaction. Then the state would explain that the people's struggle was required to prevent the return of the genocidal Pol Pot regime.<sup>51</sup> The speech of the officials typically called the people to join the KPRA in preventing the return of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>52</sup>

The PRK dictated that the event must be held at all levels, down to the hamlets and the best places to conduct the event should be the former Khmer Rouge prisons, sites of the mass graves, or former collective kitchen halls (which symbolized the cooperatives).<sup>53</sup> During the event, the people not only brought propaganda placards but also took the liberty to arm themselves with scythes, big knives, axes, or clubs to express their anger.<sup>54</sup> In Phnom Penh, the major sites that the event was typically held were the Toul Sleng Genocidal Museum (former S-21 prison) and the Choeung Ek memorial, which was a former mass grave site.<sup>55</sup>

The *People's Army* article that appeared on 23 May 1985 was quite comprehensive in its explanation of the relationship between political messages and the struggle that was required from the people. The article listed interviews with people from various social classes such as monks, intellectuals, factory workers, soldiers, and minority groups.<sup>56</sup> In all of these short interviews, there is a common theme, namely that the reason why people followed and served the state (PRK) was the hatred of the Khmer Rouge, the fear of its return, and the desire to avenge loved ones who had died under the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>57</sup> Unlike opinion columns that always alluded to the Marxist-Leninist ideology as the cause for the struggle against the Khmer Rouge (considered to be "fake revolutionaries"), the interviews listed in the 23 May article never mentioned this abstract aspect, but rather described the emotional responses of the interviewees: fear, revenge, and hatred.<sup>58</sup>

Curiously, even though the event was dropped from the list of national official events after the new government came to power in 1993 (as a result

of the UN-sponsored election), today people still gather in the thousands to organize religious ceremonies for the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>59</sup> However, the gathering places are restricted to mainly the Toul Sleng Genocidal Museum and the Choeung Ek Memorial, which are considered national landmarks.<sup>60</sup>

At the local level, all types of military units were expected to conduct internal indoctrination as well as popular indoctrination. Previously, the soldiers came to the political schools and then taught what they had learned to other soldiers or the people. To try to advance this effort one step further, in April 1985, the KPRA began to train the first batch of political instructors, numbering a total of one hundred and six instructors, and these political instructors were then assigned to various units nationwide.<sup>61</sup> Regardless, the political indoctrination program continued with or without instructors. Furthermore, just like the propaganda at the local level, the propaganda lessons for the local units have always contained the sessions about using the prevention of the return of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot as the reasons why people should join the KPRA as well as maintaining good relations with the people.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to political indoctrination, the army continued undertaking social works and civic actions in order to maintain good relations with the people. What is revealed in the 1980 articles of the *People's Army*, was an army that saved the people from hunger and famine. Rice allocation and sharing was a norm. In 1985, however, the people seemed to have become self-sufficient because the PRK no longer shared its rice with the people but rather encouraged the people to sell rice surpluses to the state. Rice surpluses are an indication that perhaps the people's living standards had improved from 1980 to 1985. Many articles (examined below) praised the people for selling rice to the state, thereby denying those resources to the resistance. Indoctrination, civic actions, and fighting the enemy had to go hand in hand, at least based on the examination of the reports in the *People's Army*. It seems that all units had maintained these credos even though the *People's Army* started to increasingly provide news about conventional battles on the Cambodian-Thai border.

This book observes that in addition to its coverage of military matters, the *People's Army* assessed the effectiveness of political activities by reporting on four metrics: the number of indoctrination sessions, the number of people attending, the number of the defectors in the "Lost" category, and the number of people who volunteered to serve in the army.

In 1984, Kampong Thom PMC conducted 799 indoctrination sessions and 181,503 people participated in these sessions.<sup>63</sup> Although the scale of these sessions remained comparatively small, the PMC noted that they motivated people to help the KPRA in identifying the resistance's underground guerrilla networks, and in some cases led the KPRA units to attack resistance's clandestine bases.<sup>64</sup> In December 1984, farmers in Kratie province sold three hundred and thirty-seven tons of rice surpluses to the state, in accordance

with the slogan “selling rice to the state is loving the nation.”<sup>65</sup> The article also noted that the army and local officials helped with the rice cultivation and harvest at no charge to the farmers, allowing the farmers to sell their surplus to the state, rather than to the resistance.<sup>66</sup> Until February 1985, Kratie had sold a total of 2,150 tons of rice surplus to the state, while Battambang had sold 6,000 tons.<sup>67</sup>

The trading relations between the people and the army were even closer in other provinces such as Pursat. In 1984, the province reported that the PMC had sold 35 pigs per month to the people, while the people sold 2,245 tons of rice surplus and 551 pigs to the state in the same year.<sup>68</sup> During this trade, the army also conducted 188 indoctrination lessons with 10,638 people participating, and as a result of this, a total of 188 of the resistance’s underground agents decided to defect after participating in these sessions.<sup>69</sup>

In other cases, the indoctrination sessions did not necessarily accompany the commercial relations between the army and the people. Due to the dual nature of the KPRA duties, the indoctrination, social works, and combat planning went hand in hand. The *People’s Army* sometimes described an operation where the militias had conducted social work in the morning (repairing people’s houses) and then planned military operations in the afternoon, after receiving tips from the local population.<sup>70</sup> On another occasion, the *People’s Army* described an all-female company of a district’s military in Svay Rieng province, which, after successful operations against a Khmer Rouge infiltration team, had returned to the district and performed the following tasks: participated in a fifteen-day indoctrination session, spent five days giving political lectures to the people, and helped the people with harvesting.<sup>71</sup>

During the first two months of 1985, the Bakan district’s military of Pursat PMC taught a twenty-six-lesson course to its soldiers, including eleven days of political studies.<sup>72</sup> The unit also ran fifty-six indoctrination sessions in the last trimester of 1984, reaching 4,758 people.<sup>73</sup> The unit also participated in indoctrination sessions run by the local officials fourteen times, including 115 participants, and the target audience of these indoctrination sessions was the families of men who had joined the resistance.<sup>74</sup> While the guerrillas stayed outside of the village, their relatives typically stayed in the village. As a result, the propaganda was aimed at getting these relatives to convince the guerrillas to defect. The *People’s Army* noted that these sessions were effective in that they could attract 196 defectors and 159 new recruits in the same period.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps as an assurance to those who had left the resistance, the Bakan district’s military also constructed 9,200 meters of “strategic fences” and erected 4,000 meters of trenches in various villages.<sup>76</sup>

In the first trimester of 1985, Kampong Speu PMC conducted various indoctrination sessions for 1,100 people, after which 164 underground guerrillas decided to defect to the KPRA.<sup>77</sup> In the same period, Kampong Thom province attracted 61 defectors, including a commander of the Khmer Rouge’s 103rd Intelligence Battalion, and the PMC subsequently received

234 defectors.<sup>78</sup> In late April 1985, the Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang, Kampot, Pursat, Takeo, and Kandal PMCs had conducted indoctrination sessions, which were attended by a total of 287,263 people.<sup>79</sup> Among them, the main targets of the indoctrination sessions were the relatives and families of the guerrillas, amounting to 325 families.<sup>80</sup> In other words, even though the KPRA knew whose family members were in the resistance, they decided to avoid violence and focused instead on propaganda efforts.

The 5th Company of a Kampong Som district's military also conducted 5,634 indoctrination sessions and helped build villages (building houses, repairing houses, building roads, and assisting with the harvest).<sup>81</sup> As a result of these actions, the company claimed that 764 people volunteered to serve along the Cambodian-Thai border, and the local people also donated the money to build a barrack for the company.<sup>82</sup> The Svay Rieng PMC, in the first six months of 1985, conducted indoctrination sessions for 10,479 soldiers and 77,935 civilians in addition to 17 cultural performances, which drew 199,258 attendants.<sup>83</sup> The PMC also helped the people harvest their crops over 1,124 hectares and demined 88 hectares to transfer these lands to civilian ownership at no charge.<sup>84</sup> The article also mentioned that the Svay Rieng PMC had given language classes to illiterate people in order to save them from the "illiteracy disaster."<sup>85</sup> The PMC concluded that these measures were very effective because it was able to recruit 1,709 to serve in its army, attracting 110 defectors as well as detaining, based on local informants, a total of 217 strangers who wandered into the province.<sup>86</sup>

Krobav village in Prey Veng province sold 232 tons of rice to the state in the first six months of 1985.<sup>87</sup> In the same period, the PMC attracted 1,141 defectors and recruited 150 militiamen province-wide.<sup>88</sup> These were not unique cases, however. The official state newspaper *SPK* reported that in August and September of 1985, a total of 53 defectors had decided to surrender to the Kampong Chhnang PMC, including one company commander and one battalion commander.<sup>89</sup>

During major events such as the party's congress, the military units were also encouraged to hold celebrations to involve the people. The year 1985 was the party's fifth congress and the *People's Army* published many articles about units acting in celebration of the event. In October, the 1st Company of Sutra Nikum district's military (Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province) helped the people harvest crops from twenty-five hectares, repaired two houses and dug two wells.<sup>90</sup> The company also conducted twenty-five indoctrination sessions for 2,450 people, as well as indoctrination sessions for its own soldiers (500 participants).<sup>91</sup> Out of a total of eighteen training sessions, eight were technical military training, five were political training, and the other five were lesson-learned sessions.<sup>92</sup> In Kampong Thom, the PMC organized internal indoctrination sessions in celebration of the party's fifth congress.<sup>93</sup> After the sessions, the soldiers dispersed to different villages to help the people with the harvest, to help repair irrigation works, build roads, and recruit people into the militias.<sup>94</sup>

Indoctrination was also the duty of the militias. One special characteristic of the KPRA was its dependence on the local militias and the maintenance of cooperation between the conventional units and the militias. The *People's Army* frequently described the welfare policy towards the militias and considered this as the main reason for success. In a village called Ta Tches in Kampong Chhnang, the militias said they served because of their fear that the Khmer Rouge might return, but at the same time, they also received many benefits such as pensions and land distribution.<sup>95</sup> Their main task was to help the people build and repair houses, and then the people would return the favor by providing intelligence to the militias regarding the guerrilla infiltration.<sup>96</sup> In the "L" village (code name) in Kampong Chhnang province, the rate of enemy infiltration was very low because the militias frequently intercepted guerrilla movements.<sup>97</sup> Village "L" was also among a few villages that had sold the highest amount of rice surplus to the state.<sup>98</sup> According to the *People's Army*, each militia family received two and a half hectares of land (approximately six acres) to cultivate and an allocation of three hundred kilograms of palm sugar in 1984.<sup>99</sup>

In some cases, the effectiveness of the indoctrination program and the policy of close relations with the people extended beyond mere rice-selling schemes and participation in the armed forces. In many instances, the KPRA's political programs directly translated into battlefield success. One article in the *People's Army* described a battle where militiamen in a village fought against a two hundred-strong Khmer Rouge battalion.<sup>100</sup> Village militias in 1985 could typically muster only one platoon, which consisted of no more than fifty fighters. In March 1985, Prey Svay village in Moung Roeussey district, Battambang province, was attacked by a Khmer Rouge battalion (around two hundred fighters) but the militiamen held strong and defeated the Khmer Rouge attack.<sup>101</sup> When interviewed by the *People's Army*, the militiamen said that the reason they joined the militias was because of both their hatred and fear of the Khmer Rouge and because the Khmer Rouge had killed their relatives and families.<sup>102</sup> During their patrols, these militiamen had often intercepted the Khmer Rouge infiltration. Perhaps as revenge, the Khmer Rouge encircled the village, but the militias' familiarity with the terrain and their determination allowed them to defend the village long enough for the district's military to intervene and relieve the siege.<sup>103</sup>

In April 1985, the 1st Company of the Chongkal district in the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province had received high distinction from the Ministry of Homeland Defense for the highest rate of successful small operations that denied infiltration by the guerrillas into its operational area.<sup>104</sup> The unit cited its close relations with the people as the key to success: liberating the people and helping to build the village.<sup>105</sup>

In some provinces such as the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province, which was one of the hubs of the resistance's activities, the militias were instrumental in hindering fierce attacks. The Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey

province was home to the PAVN's Front 479, which later gave birth to the KPRA's Region 4 and Military Region 4 (MR4). The province, therefore, had to support the 286th Division, which operated in the province's area of operation. To do this, the Siem Reap Provincial Military Command (PMC) had to secure the road at the Kulen mountain pass, which it did successfully. The *People's Army* considered the local militias to be the key to this success. In one village called Sangke Leak, the militia platoon was effective in intercepting the guerrilla's infiltration and protecting the mountain pass, thus allowing constant resupply of the 286th Division.<sup>106</sup> In an interview with the *People's Army*, the militias described the good relations between the military unit and the people as being the key to success.<sup>107</sup>

Later in the year, the number of attacks on militia platoons by the Khmer Rouge began to rise and in November 1985, the PMC decided to dispatch one of its battalions, the 23rd Battalion to help the militias defending the pass.<sup>108</sup> This addition only increased the number of soldiers defending the mountain pass while the tactics remained unchanged. What the 23rd Battalion did when they arrived was essentially the same as what the village militias had done: indoctrination, strengthening local militias, and helping the local people whenever possible.<sup>109</sup>

In Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province, there was an increase in guerrilla attacks in late 1985. This was probably the reason why a battalion needed to be dispatched to help the militias in the Kulen pass. While the units of militias were strong, their small number meant that there was a limit as to what they could achieve. Even the bravest militias could run out of ammunition and be overwhelmed. What is significant in this case, however, is the close cooperation between the militias and the conventional battalion from the PMC.

In another case in the same province, the *People's Army* reported that the 20th Battalion of the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC that had been dispatched to Pouk district a month earlier, had fended off an attack by a regiment-size enemy unit.<sup>110</sup> The newspaper attributed this success to the indoctrination works that the battalion had conducted which allowed them to build close relations with the people, a theme that has now become all too familiar.

Sometimes the people-army bond was manifested by the people's self-mobilization to help the army. Earlier, we have seen a case where the people built a barrack for the district's military.<sup>111</sup> The *People's Army* cited a case in Svay Rieng province where the army had helped the people in harvesting the crop as well as allocating their rice allowance to help the people in 1980 and in 1985.<sup>112</sup> This enabled the people to become self-sufficient enough to return the favor by building an office for the border guard.<sup>113</sup>

Another important metric for success used by the KPRA was the number of defectors in the "Lost" category. Many military organizations have a tendency to use body counts as one metric of success, but the KPRA also seemed to pay attention to the defectors. While the program had existed

since 1980, it was only in 1984 and 1985 that the program began to produce notable results. In 1984, the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC had killed 337 guerrillas, wounded 302 others, and brought in 302 defectors.<sup>114</sup> These operations were still linked with the support from the people.<sup>115</sup> In some cases, the causal link was direct. In a district in Svay Rieng province, the district's military had helped the people in the harvest of crops, had repaired roads, had repaired people's houses, and had built a hospital to provide medical care for the people.<sup>116</sup> The district noted that these actions were rewarded in the first six months of 1985, by the contribution of 212 soldiers to the KPRA, of which 52 volunteered to go and serve along the Cambodian-Thai border.<sup>117</sup>

Kampong Thom province used Kampong Svay district as an example of good political works, especially in attracting the defectors. The district's dual-duty company and militias received land allocation from the state, and their job was to provide indoctrination lessons, help the people harvest crops, and undertake social works such as repairing people's houses or digging wells.<sup>118</sup> The article cited these factors as being a morale-booster for the units.<sup>119</sup> The district's military unit, the 4th Company, also conducted internal indoctrination training. Out of the eighty-four days allocated for training in 1984, twenty-three days were political sessions.<sup>120</sup> The Kampong Thom PMC considered this unit to be the most exemplary unit, because it attracted 2,117 defectors in the period between October 1984 and March 1985.<sup>121</sup>

Takeo PMC boasted that it had successfully completed three major tasks: fighting the enemy and attracting defectors, completing social work (assisting the people with harvesting rice and repairing houses), and conducting indoctrination sessions.<sup>122</sup> The PMC considered these as keys to its success in mobilizing the population: from 1980 to 1985, the Takeo PMC received 16,416 people who volunteered to serve in the army.<sup>123</sup>

In August 1985, Kampong Thom received 69 defectors and 28 rifles while Battambang received 232 defectors and 103 rifles.<sup>124</sup> During the same month, the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC carried out 43 operations outside of the province and received 170 defectors.<sup>125</sup> The militias also carried out psychological operations and indoctrination missions in order to root out underground agents. For the first six months in 1985, the militia units, in conjunction with the Battambang PMC, were responsible for receiving 300 defectors as well as the recruitment of 30 hamlet militiamen and 467 village militiamen.<sup>126</sup>

In 1985, the number of defections was the highest in the war. In 1984, the PAVN launched a major dry season offensive and that combined with the KPRA's assertive indoctrination programs to produce the highest number of defections. It is important to note that the numbers listed below are those that belong to the "Lost" category and do not include the post-battle defection or those who surrendered during battle.

During the first six months of 1985, the PRK received a total of 2,000 defectors, of which 1,063 were former Khmer Rouge soldiers, 540 were

former KPNLAF soldiers, and 82 came from the ANS.<sup>127</sup> But this number increased drastically towards the end of the year. In the first nine months of 1985, there was a drastic increase in the number of defectors that Battambang received. From January to September 1985, Battambang PMC alone received a total of 3,566 defectors (with 2,100 units of all types of weapons), which was a 250 percent increase compared to the number of defectors in the same period in 1984.<sup>128</sup> There were a total of 116 collective defections (i.e. the enemies defected in units instead of individually), which was a five-fold increase in the same period in 1984 and the highest rank of the defectors was the regimental commander.<sup>129</sup> Its neighboring province, Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey, also noted a similar increase. In the first nine months of 1985, the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC received a total of 2,300 defectors and 774 weapons of all types.<sup>130</sup>

The nature of the defection is telling. Because the defections did not occur in the immediate aftermath of the battle (the dry season offensive concluded in early 1985), military action alone might not be able to explain the high number of defections. It is true that the military operations might have worsened living conditions in the resistance camps, thus leading the guerrillas to cease activities and defect. Even if correct, such difficult conditions were also made possible by the strength of the KPRA conventional units and militias whose close relations with the people were the key to success. The military operations only intensified, not created, these defections. This book concludes that the military operations and political indoctrination worked in tandem to produce an unusually high number of defectors in 1985.

While the *People's Army* used many metrics to show the effectiveness of its political strategy, the *People's Army* also admitted problems, even though they were usually cases of problems that had already been solved. An example was the case of the Svay Rieng PMC, which, the *People's Army* noted, had never met the required target for popular recruitment into the army.<sup>131</sup> The article admitted that the PMC was faced with various problems: the level of indoctrination was not sufficient, most people did not understand the importance of the indoctrination sessions and consequently did not attend, and finally, the instructors were not experienced enough to attract audiences.<sup>132</sup> The problem was exacerbated by smuggling activities along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, where people were more occupied with lucrative trading opportunities than with attending indoctrination sessions.<sup>133</sup>

In 1985, however, after a series of improvements made to the indoctrination process, the PMC improved on its propaganda performance. In the first nine months of 1985, the Svay Rieng PMC had conducted 67 indoctrination sessions that were attended by 23,379 people.<sup>134</sup> The rate of volunteers also steadily increased. In the first semester of 1984, the PMC had recruited 51 new soldiers (past the 40-man target) and it had recruited 75 new soldiers during the second semester of 1984 (past the 45-man

target).<sup>135</sup> During the first six months of 1985, the PMC had recruited 72 new soldiers (past the 30-man target).<sup>136</sup>

#### 4.2.3.4 1989: *time's up for indoctrination*

Towards 1989, we see a different dynamic. The number of defectors returned to its 1980 rate while Premier Hun Sen of the PRK concluded that the defections decreased because the guerrillas wanted to take a gamble to defeat the PRK after the PAVN withdrew that year.<sup>137</sup> Hun Sen said that these guerrillas will not put down their weapons before launching a major offensive, otherwise, they will lose the potential positions in the new government if they succeeded.<sup>138</sup> There also seemed to be less news on the political indoctrination and the *People's Army* started to talk about recruitment to the PMC and mobile divisions instead. Unfortunately, perhaps due to the secrecy requirement, most articles did not contain meaningful data. The exact number of recruitment that each PMC had achieved was instead published twenty-three years later in the official unit history that was published by the Institute of Military History. Subsequent sections in this chapter will analyze the new data.

It suffices here to ask whether the wave of recruitment that the KPRA received in 1989 was due to its efforts in carrying out political programs and indoctrinations in the past. A close examination of the official unit history reveals some clues as to the everlasting effects of propaganda. After the election in 1993, Cambodia has decided to relinquish its communist ideology. Propaganda, let alone the 1980s propaganda, is no longer required in the official publications. Yet, all of the official unit history publications always started with the mentioning of the propaganda messages of the 1980s. At the beginning of the official history of the MR4 and MR5, for example, the authors noted that the unit's main missions were to fight in order to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge regime, to save the people from famine, and to build the country.<sup>139</sup> All other official unit history publications mentioned the same things.<sup>140</sup> This is significant because the authors were former KPRA soldiers who continued to serve twenty-three years later and who, despite the fact that it is not required, still mentioned the political and indoctrination programs, good army-people relations, and civic actions as the main causes for success. The KPRA's political program, indoctrination, and propaganda, it seems, could linger after 1989 and maintain an army until 2012 (when the unit history was published) and beyond.

Before concluding this section, we should also note one major aspect of the KPRA's amnesty program. The conventional application of the program was known as "amnesty and rewards," such as the one that was applied during the Vietnam War. But while most programs consisted of "amnesty" and "rewards," it seems that the PRK program consisted mostly of "amnesty." Perhaps due to the fact that the PRK did not have sufficient resources, the *People's Army* never mentioned any systematic rewards scheme

for the defectors in the “Lost” category. In the *People's Army*, it seems, amnesty was at the heart of the PRK “Lost” program, while the offering of rewards seemed to depend on the local officials themselves.

In some cases, defection actually imposed a material cost to the defectors. This tended to suggest that indoctrination, not material or monetary reward, which played a role in inducing the defection. In a defection case in October 1984, a division in Battambang—Banteay Meanchey province (which, based on the description, seems to be the 179th Division) received a total of 144 defectors who brought in 114 guns, 6 canoes, and 3 bicycles.<sup>141</sup> The defectors were then received in a formal ceremony and then the authority helped resettle them to their province of birth, while the canoes and the bikes were not reclaimed by the defectors since they had given up those things to the state in the form of “goodwill.”<sup>142</sup> The reception ceremony and the resettlement seemed to be the only things that the defectors could be sure to receive from the PRK. One could never be sure of material reward from the PRK.

That said, it does not mean that the PRK had never given out material rewards. In some cases where the local government was relatively well off, the defectors were able to receive some material assistance. Perhaps the case of the highest reward reported by the *People's Army* was the defection in village “K” [code name] in Pursat province in 1984. In November 1984, a woman succeeded in convincing her husband to return to the PRK control.<sup>143</sup> The couple went to the village office together and turned in an AK assault rifle with a full magazine and a hand grenade. After the official reception event, the village authority solicited other people in the village who collectively donated to the couple fifty kilograms of rice, four meters of cloth, ten kilograms of salt, and some pocket money (which, in the Khmer tradition, can be taken to mean a token amount of money).<sup>144</sup> No other defection event reported in the *People's Army* received such handsome rewards (by Cambodian standard at the time). In fact, there was not much reward provided at all.

Indeed, one may argue that a defector to the government today might return to the resistance tomorrow. Unfortunately, there was no data to prove or disprove this hypothesis. This book does not discount the possibility of this “backsliding” behavior. However, this book will submit that a large stream of defectors will certainly disrupt the resistance's military activities as well as exposing the revolutionary's underground networks. Moreover, if the defectors also became volunteers in the KPRA, then it might be the case that they have built an *esprit de corps* with the new organization and might be less likely to return to the resistance.

#### **4.2.4 Result of indoctrination 1: the KPRA's provincial military commands (PMC)**

This section provides a brief history of the main PMCs that this book will examine: Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, and Kampong Thom. The

examination is important because it will focus on how all of them built their local forces and then how much the mobile division depended on these commands for manpower. Instead of relying on forced conscription (conscription law was not implemented until 1988), the PRK rather depended on the provinces to build their own units and then transfer them to the divisions—which should benefit from the *esprit de corps* resulting from shared values in the local community. In all of the PMCs, the main goal of the unit-building was always the support for the conventional divisions. This book submits that all of these were possible only with effective indoctrination programs carried out by the KPRA as described in the previous section.

#### 4.2.4.1 *History of the Battambang PMC*

In 1980, Battambang-Banteay Meanchey had seven district companies. In 1984, from these companies, the province established three infantry battalions, which were combined to create an infantry regiment that was transferred to MR5. In 1988, because the province was too big for one command to control, and because the threat varied (the KPNLAF was active only in the Banteay Meanchey part of the province, while the Khmer Rouge and ANS were active in Battambang), the province was divided into two parts: Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. In total, after the split with Banteay Meanchey, Battambang had eight infantry battalions under its direct command. In 1988, three of these battalions were combined to create another independent regiment, again transferred to MR5.<sup>145</sup>

In 1989, the 196th Division was lacking manpower, and Battambang contributed five battalions to replenish it. The recruitment accelerated as 1989 approached. During the CGDK offensive in 1989, the Battambang PMC had a total of thirteen infantry battalions under its command after its contribution to the mobile divisions. In other words, Battambang constantly raised its forces and frequently contributed those forces to the regular units.<sup>146</sup>

In addition, three of the six KPRA mobile divisions stationed in this province. The 196th Division defended Pailin, the 4th Division defended Samlaut, and the 6th Division defended Malai. Before the split of the province, another mobile division, the 179th Division stationed in the Banteay Meanchey part of the province. There was a reason why Battambang had this enormous formation: the NADK's main force operating in this area had two Fronts and two full divisions. In the areas around Malai, a town on the junction of the Cambodian-Thai border and the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, stood the NADK's 450th Division, which was a full division. To the southwest, in Battambang proper, i.e. south of Sisophon, the provincial capital of Banteay Meanchey, the Khmer Rouge put Front 250 in charge. Front 250 operated from the Cambodian-Thai border across Battambang and extended into the Tonle Sap area. It consisted of four divisions and four full regiments. Further south, the

NADK's 415th Division (which was also a full division) operated in the Pailin area. Another important formation, Front 909, sought to divide Battambang and Pursat by operating along the border of the two provinces. Front 909 controlled nine small divisions.<sup>147</sup>

#### *4.2.4.2 History of Banteay Meanchey PMC*

Before 1988, this northwest province was part of Battambang-Banteay Meanchey. The 179th Division (established in January 1979) was responsible for the Sisophon area and the northeast of the province. The geography and population distribution of Battambang-Banteay Meanchey was so complicated and so vast that the PRK decided to divide the province in two. On 7 January 1988, Banteay Meanchey province was formally inaugurated. It received five districts from the former province and created a new district and a provincial capital. Banteay Meanchey also inherited the service of the 179th Division.<sup>148</sup>

The 179th Division had three regiments: the 9th Regiment stationed at Preah Netr Preah district, the 10th Regiment stationed at Phnom Srok district north of the 9th Regiment, and the 11th Regiment was deployed to protect Route 69. Banteay Meanchey had five attachment units coming from outside: a contingent from Prey Veng PMC (battalion), the 69th Independent Armor Regiment (from MR4), the 12th Artillery Regiment (MR4), the 42nd Independent Regiment (MR4), and the 71st Infantry Regiment (MR4, which originated in Kampong Thom province).<sup>149</sup>

The structure of the new PMC was much heavier than that in Battambang due to its small size and disproportionate threat. Banteay Meanchey faced the bulk of the KPNLAF's forces. As a result, each district had at least two companies, and the provincial capital had six companies. Because Banteay Meanchey was a new province, it had combat companies instead of dual-duty companies. Nevertheless, these companies originated from the dual-duty companies when the province was still part of Battambang. In total, the province had twenty district companies and two battalions (52nd and 53rd). In 1989, the province upgraded all companies to battalions in anticipation of the KPNLAF offensive. Banteay Meanchey had a staggering twenty-two infantry battalions on the eve of the KPNLAF offensive. But such hasty upgrade produced a shortage of manpower. Each battalion was only a reduced battalion, having between two hundred and fifty and three hundred and seventy soldiers each.

#### *4.2.4.3 History of Kampong Thom PMC*

The 19th Battalion, an all-Cambodian battalion from Long Giao, was used as the basis for the creation of the Kampong Thom PMC. In 1981, the province had formed one infantry battalion (the 30th Battalion), six district companies and thirteen dual-duty companies. In 1983, the province

recruited five more dual-duty companies, and in 1984, it was able to create the 71st Regiment. Just like the regiments in Battambang, this regiment was transferred to Region 4. The following year, the province created two more battalions. One was 55th Riverine Infantry Battalion, which was in charge of security along the Steung Sen Tributary connecting the provincial capital to the Tonle Sap Lake. Another unit, Battalion 36A, was created for the purpose of defending the provincial capital. In 1986, the province created another district to the northeast and formed three companies. At the same time, it relinquished command of Battalion 36A which was augmented to establish the 72nd Regiment, once again transferred to Region 4.<sup>150</sup>

In 1988, the province began to accelerate its recruitment, as it expected heavy operations to come after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops. Battalion 36B was formed to replace the transferred 36A. Another riverine infantry battalion, the 15th Battalion, was created in September 1988 but was again transferred to the Navy Directorate of the Ministry of Homeland Defense. In 1989, the province reached the highest point of its build-up with the following combat units: the 20th Infantry Regiment (two battalions), the 3rd, 30th, and 36B infantry Battalions, the 55th Riverine Infantry Battalion, thirty companies (in eight districts), one artillery battery, one armor company and one reconnaissance troop.<sup>151</sup>

The CGDK units operating in this area consisted of several NADK divisions and one ANS brigade. The NADK had seven divisions operating in the area. Only three, the 616th Division, 802nd Division, and 607th Division were indigenous to Kampong Thom. The 417th Division operated on the border of Kampong Thom, Kampong Cham, and Kratie. The 920th Division operated between this province and Kampong Cham, and the 980th Division operated in the area near Siem Reap's southern border. The 785th Division, in particular, was a transportation/special force division with forces stationed in Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, and Siem Reap. According to the former chief of staff of Siem Reap PMC, this unit was primarily a logistics unit but was also used to spearhead the attack in places where the normal units could not get through.<sup>152</sup>

The ANS had one brigade operating in Kampong Thom province, the 15th Brigade. The KPNLAF's OMZ7 also had some forces operating in Kampong Thom because a regimental commander was native to the province. The total number of the combined CGDK regular troops permanently fighting in Kampong Thom was estimated to be between fourteen and eighteen hundred soldiers.<sup>153</sup> However, the Khmer Rouge could easily mobilize other units to concentrate in this province as required.<sup>154</sup>

#### ***4.2.5 Result of indoctrination 2: Region 4, Military Region 4 and 5***

The second echelon of territorial units were the Regions and Military Regions, which were the higher headquarters of several provinces in the same

areas. This higher headquarters had its own battalions and regiments, but its strength rested upon its mobility, armor, and heavy artillery, which it could mobilize to intervene in any provinces that were threatened by the CGDK. The Region and MR were the Cambodian successor units who stepped up to assume the responsibility of the departing PAVN. Therefore, we need to examine the organization of the latter.

The highest command headquarters of the PAVN units were organized into "Front." The PAVN had four Fronts under the command of a supreme headquarters known as Front 719 based in Phnom Penh. Front 579 was supported by the PAVN Military Region 5 (meaning, the military region back in Vietnam) and controlled operations in Steung Treng, Ratanak Kiri, Mondul Kiri, parts of Kratie, and Preah Vihear. The Front's headquarters was in Steung Treng province. Front 979 was supported by Vietnam's Military Region 9 and controlled operations in Takeo, Kompot, Kampong Som, Koh Kong, Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, and parts of Battambang (from the town of Samlaut to the south). The Front's headquarters was on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, at the head of National Road 3, which led to Takeo-Kampot area. Front 797 was supported by Vietnam's Military Region 7 and controlled operations in Kratie, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, and Svay Rieng. The Front's headquarters was in Kampong Cham.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, Vietnam's Military Region 7 supported another front, Front 479, based in Siem Reap's provincial capital and controlling operations in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey and Siem-Reap-Ouddar Meanchey. While Front 479 controlled only two provinces, the situation, population, and geography were very complicated, mainly because the area bordered with Thailand, which made it relatively easy for infiltration.

In late 1984, these four Fronts made way for the Cambodian military regions to take shape by shadowing their boundaries and responsibilities. At the beginning, the Cambodian military regions were known as "Regions." Thus, Region 1 replaced Front 579, Region 2 replaced Front 797, Region 3 replaced Front 979, and Region 4 replaced Front 479. This book will focus only on Region 4 because the decisive operations between the PRK and the CGDK were fought in this area from 1989 to 1991.

In August 1984, Region 4 was formally inaugurated. The headquarters was in Siem Reap provincial capital, and then it gradually moved to replace the headquarters of Front 479 in front of Angkor Wat temple, less than ten kilometers from the provincial capital. About one kilometer from Angkor Wat temple was another temple complex, Angkor Thom, controlled by the Khmer Rouge. Region 4 controlled forces in three very large provinces: Battambang-Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey, and Pursat. All of the divisions operating in the area immediately fell under tactical control of Region 4.<sup>156</sup>

Region 4 had seven organic units: three maneuver regiments (41st, 42nd, and 43rd); the 69th Independent Armor Regiment; the 12th Artillery Regiment, Regiment 75A (protection); and Regiment 75B (combat engineer).

The Ouddar Meanchey part of the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province was isolated, but the Samraong district was densely populated and it acted almost as a PMC in its own right. The 43rd Regiment of Region 4 and the 286th Division stationed in the district.<sup>157</sup>

A few months after the PRK split Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, on 28 June 1988, Region 4 was also split into Military Region 4 (MR4) and Military Region 5 (MR5). MR5 controlled Battambang, Pursat, and Kampong Chhnang provinces while MR4 controlled Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey and Banteay Meanchey. Thus, MR4 benefited from the presence of the 286th Division, the 179th Division, and controlled the PMCs in its area of operations while MR5 had the 4th, 6th, and the 196th Divisions and its own PMCs in its area of operations.<sup>158</sup>

### 4.3 Territory-centric versus population-centric strategy

The last echelon of the KPRA was that of the mobile divisions. These units were under the control of the General Staff Headquarters but had to cooperate with the military regions where they operated. The mobile divisions were used to achieve objectives of highest importance. As a result, they would move around the country to where they were needed most. We shall examine the KPRA's strategy in this section and the next section will examine the impacts of the strategy on the mobile divisions.

The Vietnamese grand strategy in the Cambodian conflict was one of "building the Cambodian force so that it can defend itself."<sup>159</sup> As a country that had fought a war based on the People's War concept, this was not surprising. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese strategy in Cambodia was torn between a territory-centric strategy (protecting the territory) and a population-centric one (prioritize the protection of the population). During the Vietnam War, the PAVN and its allies adhered to a population-centric strategy, which was expedient given the superior American firepower. As the PAVN moved into Cambodia, however, it was the side that possessed superior firepower. The Vietnamese were thus torn. This book characterizes three phases of Vietnamese strategy in Cambodia.

The first phase of the Vietnamese strategy was the building of local governance, which was almost non-existent after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime. In fact, when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, they fiercely hunted down all local officials or anyone who had any relations with the old regime. Building local governance from zero was a monumental task for the PRK and Vietnam. The first one to manage those duties was the armed forces. Thus, the PAVN assigned the local-governance military expert units (the units with four-digit numerical designation) to work hand in hand with the Cambodian units. Concurrently, the Central Committee of the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party also sent armed propaganda units to build the dual-duty units, the provincial battalions, and then regiments. In short, phase 1 was undeniably a population-centric strategy.

In phase 2, the PAVN launched major operations along the border to clear the refugee camps from which the resistance launched the raids into the interior. In early 1985, most of the border camps were cleared, and all factions within the CGDK had to move their bases of operations into Thailand. This phase ended with the establishment and strengthening of the KPRA's mobile divisions: 4th, 6th, 179th, 196th, and 286th Divisions.

With the completion of this phase, the PAVN launched phase 3 of their strategy, which was perhaps the longest phase. The strategy then decidedly moved from population-centric to territory-centric. Just before the dry season offensive of 1984, the PRK and the Vietnamese had planned a controversial strategy known as the "K-5" belt strategy.<sup>160</sup> Conceived as a five-year plan, this strategy literally called for the construction of a "wall" along the Cambodian-Thai border. According to Régaud, this wall was to be upgraded with the generous use of landmines, anti-infantry obstacles, tank ditches, and interior-line road networks.<sup>161</sup> Laborers were sent from the interior to construct the wall in the dense, malaria-infested jungle, while the mobile divisions would move up to staff the outposts in the isolated areas along the border to protect the wall.<sup>162</sup>

The strategy was never published in any official documents, but the *People's Army* newspaper made numerous comments related to the strategy throughout the years. It was certainly not easy to comprehend how the Vietnamese, who were one of the masters of People's War, could come up with such a territory-centric strategy at the expense of a population-centric one. To be fair, the strategy of using conventional units in remote areas to interdict the resistance's infiltration was adopted by the US during the Vietnam War. But its effectiveness was highly questionable.<sup>163</sup>

As the years went on, both the KPRA and the PAVN realized that closing off a five hundred-plus kilometer border was no simple task. Even Premier Hun Sen, who had come to power in late 1984, had already disowned the strategy. Nevertheless, the Central Committee of the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party never totally abandoned the strategy, and while the wall and the anti-infantry obstacles were never totally constructed for the entire stretch of the Cambodian-Thai border, an enduring legacy of the K-5 belt strategy still cast a dark shadow on the mobile divisions and the PRK's reputation.

From the start, the K-5 belt strategy had many flaws and problems. First of all, the laborers who were recruited for the construction project were discontented by the hardship. Second, deploying the mobile divisions and territorial units far away from the population center for an extended period of time had a large negative effect on morale of the troops.<sup>164</sup> Thus, after the PAVN raided the border camps in 1984 and 1985, it began its gradual withdrawal to the rear, while the KPRA mobile divisions assumed positions to the front: the 4th Division in Samlaut, the 196th Division in Pailin, the 6th Division in Malai, the 179th Division in Banteay Meanchey, the 286th Division in Ouddar Meanchey, and even a sizeable number of territorial units



*Figure 4.1* A section of the K-5 belt on the border.

Source: courtesy of a former high-ranking official of the KPNLF.

also had to leave their provinces to move to protect the border. Third, this strategy effectively pushed all units into isolated positions, and firepower became the only thing that prevented the resistance from overrunning the positions. As a consequence of this strategy, the KPRA had to adhere to a six-month stockpile logistics system because the positions were too far away to maintain continuous re-supply. The deteriorating quality of the food resulting from this doctrine put a further burden on the morale of the troops.

The irony of this episode was that the Vietnamese, who had defeated the American strategy of bringing the fight away from the population centers, found themselves implementing the very same strategy in Cambodia. The KPRA was pushed to defend isolated outposts in the jungle, not unlike what the American troops did during the Vietnam War. The CGDK intended to give the Vietnamese a taste of their own medicine.

#### **4.4 The KPRA mobile divisions went to war along the border**

From 1979 to 1989, all of the mobile divisions were oriented towards the border. Similar to the territorial forces, the KPRA's regular units were also born out of the all-Cambodian battalions that came from Long Giao province in 1979. Most of these battalions became the "genesis battalion" that formed the backbone of the PMC in many provinces. Initially, each province, except Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham, was allocated one battalion. But instead of becoming the genesis battalion that gave birth to the territorial troops in each province, some battalions combined to create brigades and then divisions. In the beginning, there were four divisions: 4th, 179th, 196th, and 286th. After the dry season offensive of 1984–1985, a new division, the 6th Division was created. These divisions were stationed in the areas where the decisive operations between the PRK and the CGDK occurred. Many other divisions that the KPRA created after 1989 will not be discussed here as they did not have the extensive battlefield activities as the former five divisions.

To the northwest of Battambang-Banteay Meanchey was the frontier town of Pailin, well known for its gemstone quarry. The 196th Division was the unit that defended this town. The 196th Division was formally inaugurated on 19 June 1981 and had three regiments: 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. To the south of Pailin was another frontier town, Samlaut, which was the site of the 1968 farmer's rebellion. This area was under the control of the 4th Division. Just like the 196th Division, the 4th Division traced its origin to the all-Cambodian battalions from Long Giao. These battalions were first combined to create the 2nd Brigade. Between 1981 and 1982, the brigade moved to Pursat to guard Route 56, in the Veal Veng area. Around 1983, it fought with the PAVN's 339th Division, which defended the border between Pursat and Battambang-Banteay Meanchey. In April 1983, in anticipation for the 1984 dry season offensive, the brigade became the 4th Division, but it would

constantly raise its forces to become a full division. The 4th Division had three maneuver regiments: 13th, 14th, and 15th as well as nine functional battalions.

The original mission of this unit was to cover National Road 4, which linked the capital to the sea port at Kampong Som (Sihanouk Ville). But the area was more secure thanks to the geography. To the west, along the Cambodian-Thai border, was the steepest summit of the Cardamom Mountain. To cross from the Thai province of Trat into the interior of Cambodia would take at least a week's march through rugged terrain. The KPRA General Staff Headquarters had determined that the avenue of approach would be very difficult for the Khmer Rouge to sustain large-scale infiltration. In effect, the PMC would be enough to deal with the threat and the division would be much more useful elsewhere. In 1987, as the PAVN withdrew, the 4th Division was pushed northward to defend the southern part of Battambang.

Later, part of the 14th Regiment was detached from the 4th Division and was augmented to become the 94th Brigade, which then defended National Road 5 at the border between Pursat and Battambang. Part of the 13th Regiment also had to stay behind to help cover the rear position of the new brigade. So when the 4th Division was pushed to Samlaut, it had only one full maneuver regiment (15th Regiment), two understrength regiments, a headquarters unit, as well as the nine functional battalions. In short, the 4th Division (and its former units) arrayed its forces to cover the Cambodian-Thai border from Pursat to Samlaut in Battambang.<sup>165</sup>

Pailin and Samlaut were almost like twin-cities. If one traveled from the Battambang provincial capital via Route 10 through Ratanak Mondul district, the road would fork at Traeng village, where the northern route would lead to Pailin, and the southern route to Samlaut. The 196th Division and the 4th Division had to support each other. Should either one fail or should the Khmer Rouge capture the crossroad at Ratanak Mondul district and Traeng, the other unit would be isolated and risk annihilation.

The third division that stationed in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey was the 179th Division. Just like other conventional divisions, this unit was also born out of the Long Giao battalions. These battalions were combined to create the 4th Brigade. Just before the 1984–1985 dry season offensive, the 4th Brigade was augmented to become the 179th Division. The division had three regiments: 9th, 10th, and 11th. On 5 December 1984, the 9th and 10th Regiments fought alongside the PAVN in the campaign that destroyed all major resistance's camps along the Cambodian-Thai border in the vicinity of Banteay Meanchey area. The 179th Division arrayed its forces to protect the eastern flank of Banteay Meanchey province when the province was inaugurated in 1988.<sup>166</sup>

Lastly, to the east, the province of Siem Ream-Ouddar Meanchey had only one division but it was a heavy, mechanized division. The 286th Division was born out of the Long Giao battalions that followed the PAVN to Siem

Reap. On 19 November 1979, these battalions combined to create the 3rd Brigade. On 28 June 1980, the brigade was augmented to become the 286th Division. The main mission of the 286th Division was to defend Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province as well as its border with Thailand.

Due to the geography that divided the province into two parts and because the territorial troops were able to maintain security in the areas surrounding the provincial capital, the 286th Division was pushed north past the Kulen Mountain. The area was the Ouddar Meanchey part of the province, where terrain was flat, making it relatively easy for tanks and other armored vehicles to move around. The 286th Division had three combined arms regiments (i.e. a combination of armor, artillery, and infantry units), one artillery regiment, and nine functional battalions. One of its regiments, the 44th Regiment had four battalions, all of which were raised from the Prey Veng PMC.<sup>167</sup>

Due to the importance of the Samraong and Chong Kal district, the 286th Division was not deployed to protect the border. It stayed behind to protect the two districts. MR4 also dispatched the 43rd Regiment to help shore up the defense of the two districts. Perhaps still true to its K-5 belt strategy, MR4 also deployed the 41st Regiment to defend the isolated village of Anlong Veng. The unit was completely isolated.<sup>168</sup>

In 1985, after the 16-Camps Campaign, as the PAVN prepared to move away from the frontline, the KPRA established another new unit, the 6th Division. The origin of this division was different from those of the previous four. The latter were born out of the all-Cambodian battalions from Long Giao. These battalions were not the only Cambodian units who fought in 1979, however. As the PAVN moved into Cambodia in 1979, it also raised new units from the refugees encountered along the way. These forces were embedded into Vietnamese units. For example, in one mixed battalion, there could be three Vietnamese companies and one Cambodian company.

The 6th Division was born out of the Cambodian units embedded to the PAVN's 8th Division of Front 979, which was stationed in Kampot province. The mission of the 6th Division was to guard the border wall and fill in the gap between the 179th Division and the 196th Division as well as to protect the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. Deployed to the remote area called Malai, it was perhaps the most isolated unit of all the divisions. Yet, its situation was representative of all the divisions. If travelled by foot from the nearest population center to the division headquarter, the journey took at least one week, and the road was practically unusable during the rainy season.<sup>169</sup> Khmer Rouge ambush along this road was a certainty.

The 6th Division had the highest commander casualty rate of all the divisions. The area was infested with malaria, and the water source had a high calcium concentration that severely affected the soldiers' urinary tracts. Apart from enemy actions, disease and sanitation problems ranked second in generating casualties among soldiers of the 6th Division. In the

“stockpile” concept of logistics, during the entire dry season period, the transportation corps would struggle to supply the division for six months, covering the whole rainy season. All other units encountered similar problems.

However, this division made up for these problems by having two advantages: numbers and good commanders. The division had around seven thousand soldiers on average, which was one of the biggest among the regular units, which generally could muster only around five thousand. The commander was a graduate of the M.V. Frunze Military Academy in the former Soviet Union, and his deputy commander was also a product of a Soviet military school. Even today, the former commander claimed that he had never lost a battle in which he personally had commanded troops.<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, a good division must have both good commanders and committed soldiers. The KPRA would discover this the hard way in the 1989 CGDK offensive.

#### 4.5 Summary and discussion: a war of numbers

Due to a lack of resources, it seemed that the KPRA had to rely on ideology and manpower. Its military system was essentially built to meet this challenge. The KPRA had no air force or navy. To be fair, it started to buy some MiG fighters from the Soviet Union and sent many pilots there for training, but it almost never used the planes in its operations. The reason was simple: a simple strafing run could easily take the plane across the Cambodian-Thai border. The KPRA did have patrol boats and a Navy Directorate, but once again, the priority was land warfare. By 1989, the result of this priority was clear.

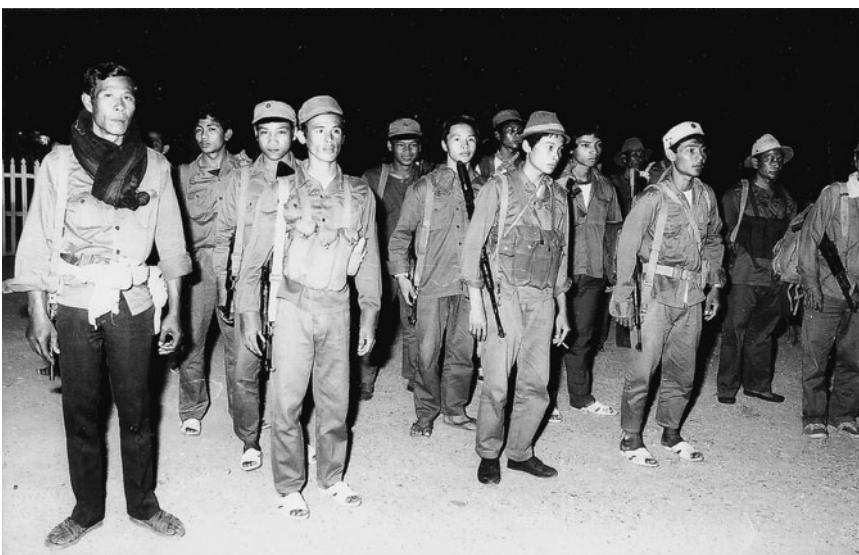
Table 4.1 shows the estimated total of KPRA soldiers in 1987 which roughly corresponds to the estimate of Western scholars. Westad and Quinn-Judge, for example, put the number of regular troops at 100,000 and the militias at 200,000; both numbers are for 1989.<sup>171</sup> In the Cambodian Civil War, the difference between the numbers of conventional forces and territorial forces was staggering. The number of militias (popular forces) alone outnumbered the regular troops by a ratio of almost 2 to 1. When combined with the territorial troops, this ratio jumps to an astonishing 3 to 1 numerical superiority in favor of the territorial and popular forces.

With a combined manpower of about twenty thousand soldiers, the mobile divisions struggled to defend the long border without air support. In addition, the combined territorial troops in Battambang and Banteay Meanchey amounted to thirty-five battalions in 1989, excluding the militias and units that were sent to replenish the mobile divisions.<sup>172</sup> In other words, the total number of mobile divisions and the territorial troops in these two provinces was equal to the total number of the Khmer Rouge forces operating in the entire country. As we count the reinforcement from MR2, MR4, MR5, Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC, Pursat PMC, and of the 286th

*Table 4.1* An estimate of the PRK's military power (1987). The estimate is that of a former KPRA officer of the operations section of the General Staff Headquarters (interview in Phnom Penh, 13 March 2013)

Categories	Estimate	Percentage of total	Notes
Regular troops	75,000	24%	Mobile divisions, commanded by the general staff HQ and the Ministry of Defense
Territorial forces	55,000	17.62%	Troops at the district level and above. This included regular troops under the authority of the province
Village militias (including national road militias)	16,000	5.12%	Controlled by the village. Received a substantially lower salary than the regular troops. Weapons were provided by the KPRA and could be requisitioned on the battlefield
Hamlet militias	150,000	48%	Controlled by the hamlet. Did not have salary, frequently received rice allocation. Weapons could be requisitioned on the battlefield
Railroad and rubber plantation militias	7,000	2.24%	Sustainment and logistics during operations covered by the government
Government establishment militias	9,000	3.02%	Guarded the government office buildings at night
Fishing lot militias	N/A	N/A	A small segment of militias in charge of security of the fishing lots in the Tonle Sap Lake area
Sub-total militias	182,000	58.33%	
Sub-total militias and territorial troops	237,000	75.96%	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>312,000</b>		

Division, as well as the militias in MR4 and MR5, the KPRA simply outnumbered all three CGDK factions. Once we count the strategic reserve, which might have consisted of the combat police, the newly established 5th and 7th Divisions, and the Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear PMC, the CGDK seemed to have a numerical problem. In addition to the numbers, all mobile divisions received reinforcements from the territorial troops, and the territorial troops themselves were considered to be part of



*Figure 4.2* A KPRA militia unit assembled for night duty (1989). Note the different types of shoes worn by each soldier. The ragtag appearance usually betrays their combat effectiveness and determination.

Source: SPK.

a comprehensive defense system. These people not only outnumbered the resistance, they did so on their own turf. The KPRA's ability to mobilize the people and integrate them into a comprehensive defense system made life hard for the CGDK.<sup>173</sup>

In the Cambodian Civil War from 1979 to 1991, therefore, the KPRA's numerical superiority was clear. What caused this disparity? This book concludes that this must have been the result of high morale. First of all, there was no conscription law until 1988. The PRK could easily pass such a law, but it did not, which leads this book to conclude that the PRK did not need a law to recruit people into the army.<sup>174</sup> In addition, financial rewards also did not seem to be the only reason people served because almost two-thirds of the KPRA forces were territorial forces and they received only meager revenue from serving. Finally, we can safely assume that there was no ghost soldier or ornamental soldier (those who inflated the payroll but did not actually serve). At least these soldiers did not exist in an alarming number, otherwise the scandal would be exposed when those units were transferred to the mobile divisions in the late 1980s.

The next logical question is, where did the high morale, if it existed, come from? First of all, the PRK had a clear political program, namely the prevention of the Khmer Rouge's return. Second, this program was implemented by the armed propaganda units, which were later upgraded into dual-duty

companies. The military organization was inextricably linked to propaganda, indoctrination, and the implementation of the political program. Using the prevention of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal regime as a cause, the dual-duty companies later recruited more people to serve in the provincial battalions and regiments.

Based on the current state of the documents and the archive, there was no evidence to support an alternative explanation of the high level of morale other than indoctrination and the military organization that facilitated such activities. In other words, we observed a strong indoctrination program and strong message and these correlated with the high morale. The current archive and documents did not offer any other alternative explanation. The existing evidence was also anecdotal in nature. In one example, as the Vietnamese troops prepared for the withdrawal in 1989, the PRK's local officials had showed their concerns that the Khmer Rouge might have returned and suggested they had served to prevent such an eventuality.<sup>175</sup> That official was the governor of Banteay Meanchey province who, as we will see in the next chapter, refused to abandon the province in the face of CGDK attack. Fear for the Khmer Rouge seemed to be one of the main reasons why people served in the KPRA, and the PRK's indoctrination programs reinforced that commitment.

Being the strongest party, the PRK did have its shortcomings. The strongest party tended to think that everything is possible, and that was perhaps the genesis of the K-5 belt strategy. Numerical and moral superiority notwithstanding, by pushing many units to the isolated border areas, the KPRA essentially gave up three main advantages that it had earned by laborious indoctrination work. First, their force became stretched out and consequently, the CGDK could mass its combat power to overwhelm and defeat each one in turn. Second, while the KPRA's territorial units knew the terrain in their locale, once they moved to the jungle, that advantage was lost. Third, as the mobile division absorbed the PMC reinforcements, the morale of the latter started to dip as they fought further away from their homes. With the K-5 belt strategy, the KPRA's advantage boiled down to only one: numerical superiority.

Thus, while the KPRA started with an excellent population-centric strategy, it drifted to territory-centric strategy as it became the strongest army on the battlefield. The PRK came to meet the 1989 CGDK combined offensive with an army that was scattered all along the border.

## Notes

1 Hồng, *Cuộc chiến bắt buộc* [The Obligated War], 116–119.

2 Conboy claimed it was the size of a brigade, but the Vietnamese sources and the KPRA's sources suggested it was division-size. See វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រភាគ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិភាគភ្នំពេញ ៤ [History of Military Region 4] (ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកច្ចូលរាយ បនទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ភ្នំពេញ ២០១៣ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General

Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]), 15. The official history of MR5 also corroborated this view.

3 Other provinces in the eastern part of the country also received some of these units. On this issue, see Nguyễn Văn Hồng, *Cuộc chiến bắt buộc* [The Obligated War], 68.

4 “Comments at the graduation at the Vanda Institute.” *Cambodia New Vision*, The cabinet office of the Prime Minister, Issue 130 (22 December 2008).

5 In Cambodia, a hamlet is a single settlement. The number of families and houses may vary from one hamlet to another, but the hamlet is a single unit. Several hamlets combine to create a village. Several villages combine to create a district. The districts then combine to create a province. In the civilian administration system, province is the highest territorial administration. In the military system, several provincial military commands combine to create a military region.

6 This was a Soviet practice known as “Socialist competition.” As it moved to other socialist countries, especially in Cambodia, not much changed. See វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៥ [History of Military Region 5] (ក្នុងព្រៃណ, កម្ពុជាតាំង អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋានប្រជាធិបតេយ្យ, ភ្នំពេញ ២០១៣ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]).

7 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៩ ពេស្តិរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 26.

8 See Editorial staff, “10-year Achievements Showed our KPRA’s Commitments to the Party, the Motherland, and the People which is Worthy to be the Cutting Edge Instrument which Protects the Power of the Party, the Power of the Administration, and the Power of the People.” *People’s Army*, Special Edition, 25 January 1989.

9 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៩ ពេស្តិរាប [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 23.

10 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៩ ពេស្តិរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 30.

11 The KPRA’s official newspaper, the *People’s Army*, mentioned this unit on a regular basis after its creation in 1984.

12 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៩ ពេស្តិរាប [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 35.

13 Editorial staff, “The Course at the Military School is a Success, Both for the Students and the Teachers,” *People’s Army*, December 1979.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Whether the political commanders have done a good job in building morale will be examined in Chapter 5 on operations during the Cambodian civil war where some units routed while others did not.

17 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៩ ពេស្តិរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 15.

18 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៩ ពេស្តិរាប [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 51.

19 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្មយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរីរិតិយាងកម្មការ ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 1.

20 Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, 62.

21 Ibid., 62–65.

22 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធ [Institute of Military History], ឯកសារអាជីវកម្ម [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 35. The operations were code named “C-80.”

23 Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, 63. The Vietnamese troops never got involved in the bureaucratic business of the PRK's local officials.

24 Editorial staff, “The 1st Battalion Mobilized the People for Cultivation on New Land,” *People's Army*, January 1980.

25 Editorial staff, “The People's Revolutionary Army [i.e. PMC] in Kampong Chhnang Worked Tirelessly to Harvest Agricultural Products and Support the People's Agricultural Harvests,” *People's Army*, February 1980.

26 Ibid.

27 Editorial staff, “The 19th Battalion in Kampong Thom Prepared for the Upcoming Harvest,” *People's Army*, June 1980.

28 Sin Seda, “The 33rd Battalion Helped the People in Peam Chileang Village to Harvest and Increase the Standard of Living,” *People's Army*, June 1980.

29 Ibid.

30 Sorn Saramalay, “Takeo Province Received Many Distinctions,” *People's Army*, August 1980.

31 Editorial staff, “The ‘E’ Armored Unit Studied, Trained, and Built Its Ranks and Files,” *People's Army*, September 1980.

32 Editorial staff, “News in the Armed Forces,” *People's Army*, November 1980.

33 Ibid.

34 Editorial staff, “News in the Armed Forces,” *People's Army*, December 1980.

35 Editorial staff, “The 6th Battalion Built Up Its Core Members,” *People's Army*, August 1980.

36 Dam Dararith, “The 7th Battalion Built Up Its Core Members,” *People's Army*, March 1980.

37 Ibid. Slocomb, in her book, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, translated the term as “misled.”

38 Ibid.

39 An example of this distinction can be found in many articles in the *People's Army*. For an example, see Kim Ratana, “News in the Armed Forces,” *People's Army*, 6 October 1985.

40 Hang Tchoeun, “New Happiness of Brother Keth Chhum and Brother Buth Ven,” *People's Army*, 7 March 1985.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Prach Sareth, “Honey Trap,” *People's Army*, 25 April 1985.

46 Ibid.

47 Hun Sitha, “The Night of Disillusionment,” *People's Army*, 2 May 1985.

48 Ibid.

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76 Ibid.

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86 Ibid.

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92 Ibid.

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98 Ibid.

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105 Ibid.

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107 Ibid.

108 Editorial staff, "The 23rd Battalion Mobilized the People to Maintain Security," *People's Army*, 20 November 1985.

109 Ibid.

110 Dy Pontara, "The Bravery of the 20th Battalion," *People's Army*, 4 December 1985.

111 Prach, "The 5th Company of Kampong Som."

112 Prach Sareth, "Building People-Army Solidarity," *People's Army*, 28 March 1985.

113 Ibid.

114 Editorial staff, "News in the Armed Forces," *People's Army*, 2 May 1985.

115 Ibid.

116 Editorial staff, "Achievements of Svay Teap District Military in Building and Protecting the Villages and Hamlets," *People's Army*, 9 May 1985.

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119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

121 Prach Sareth, "The Twin Duties that the 4th Company of Kampong Svay District Has Performed Well," *People's Army*, 16 May 1985.

122 Kim Sopheak, "Three Achievements of Takeo Youths," *People's Army*, 30 May 1985.

123 Ibid.

124 Editorial staff, "News in the Armed Forces," *People's Army*, 3 October 1985.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 SPK, "The 'Lost' Have Returned to the Revolutionary Government," *People's Army*, 11 July 1985.

128 SPK, "Thousands of the 'Lost' Have Returned to the Revolution," *People's Army*, 30 October 1985.

129 Ibid.

130 SPK, "2,300 'Lost' Soldiers Returned to Live with the People," *People's Army*, 13 November 1985. While the number was aggregated at the province level, the district military and the militias were also actively involved in attracting the defectors. The Banteay Ampil district in Battambang province, for example,

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received 130 defectors and 71 weapons in July 1985. See Dy Pontara and Kim Ratana, “News in the Armed Forces,” *People's Army*, 20 November 1985.

131 Yin Saren, “Why Did the Svay Rieng PMC Succeed in Recruiting New Soldiers?” *People's Army*, 6 October 1985.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid.

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

137 ឱប សុដល [Diep, Sophal], សាធារណរដ្ឋប័ណ្ណមានិតកម្មណ៍ និង រដ្ឋប័ណ្ណមានិតកម្មណ៍ [The People's Republic of Kampuchea and the State of Kampuchea] (ហាត់ពុមិនក្នុងណាន្ត រាជីមុនិតជាតិឱយ ផ្លូវ ២០៩៣ [Phnom Penh: Tchouk Jey Publishing, 2013]), 232.

138 Ibid., 233.

139 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 1, និង វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 1.

140 As a person who was deeply involved with the establishment of the Institute of Military History, the author of this book could confirm that these authors only received format guidelines from the Institute and the Institute did not control the contents. Yet, the contents were very similar when it came to propaganda messages.

141 Editorial Staff, “News in the Armed Forces,” *People's Army*, 15 November 1984.

142 Ibid.

143 Prach Sareth, “Return As Promised,” *People's Army*, 22 November 1984.

144 Ibid.

145 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបានបរិតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជន ខេត្តបាត់ដំបង [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 40.

146 Ibid., 41.

147 Ibid., 5.

148 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 26.

149 Ibid., 30.

150 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៥ [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 27.

151 Ibid., 28.

152 Ibid., 5.

153 Ibid., 6.

154 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 8.

155 Hồng, *Cuộc chiến bắt buộc* [The Obligated War], 39.

156 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 44.

157 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 38.

158 Ibid., 41 and វិទ្យាសុច្ចានបុរីតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីតិយោជនកូមិកាត ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 53.

159 Hồng, *Cuộc chiến bắt buộc* [The Obligated War], 5.

160 “K-5” is a transliteration from the Khmer version of the abbreviation, which uses the Khmer “k'orr” and the number 5. There are conflicting accounts as to the origin of this strategy. One account claims that K-5 came from five Khmer

words, all starting with “k’orr,” which can be tentatively translated as: Construction Work for the Defense of Cambodia Homeland. Another account claims that the number 5 is both about the number of “k’orr” in the abbreviation as well as the fact that it was a five-year plan. The literature on this issue is sketchy. Perhaps the best book on the subject is Margaret Slocomb’s *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979–1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot*. Nevertheless, while the book gave a good introduction of the K-5 belt strategy, it did not contain any discussions on military strategy, which was at the heart of the K-5 belt strategy.

161 Régaud, *Cambodge dans la Tourmente*, 126–128.

162 Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea*, 229–235. Interested readers can also check Slocomb’s book for details on the human costs of the strategy. The costs were indeed heavy, but this book will not discuss the issue because the major concern here is the impacts of the K-5 strategy on the military units, which were also very dreadful.

163 For the debate on the so-called “McNamara Line,” see Austin Long, *On “Other War,” Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006) 49.

164 In Chapter 6, we shall see how units that fought well in the interior had routed when they were deployed to the jungle along the Cambodian-Thai border. If we use wholesale desertion as a measurement of morale, then the morale of these units were extremely low when serving along the border.

165 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រព័ន្ធឌីសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយោច ខេត្តបាត់ដំបង [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 25.

166 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រព័ន្ធឌីសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History]. ប្រវត្តិយោច ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 13.

167 Ibid., 37.

168 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រព័ន្ធឌីសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History]. ប្រវត្តិយោច ៥ [History of Military Region 4], 65.

169 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រព័ន្ធឌីសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងណែលខេ ៩៩ [History of the 11th Brigade] (ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកច្ចារបេទសេ, គ្មានការពារជាតិ, ៩៣ ២០១៣). [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]), 3.

170 There is no way to authenticate such a claim, given the current state of documentation. However, it was true that the 6th never routed. See វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រព័ន្ធឌីសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងណែលខេ ៥៩ [History of the 51st Brigade] (ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកច្ចារបេទសេ, គ្មានការពារជាតិ, ៩៣ ២០១៣) [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]), 2. After the war, units of the 6th Division were later broken up and then augmented to combine with the 196th Division, the KPNLAF, and the ANS elements in order to create new units like the 51st, 52nd, and 53rd intervention infantry brigades. That is the reason why the history of the 6th Division, as well as other divisions, were contained in the history of the intervention infantry brigades. This book collected parts and parcels of the stories from many official units’ histories and combined them to reconstruct the history of the 6th and 196th Divisions.

171 Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, eds., *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972–1979* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 219.

172 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រព័ន្ធឌីសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយោច ខេត្តបាត់ដំបង [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 13.

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173 See the section on the operation in Phnom Srok district of Banteay Meanchey in Chapter 5 of this book.

174 The PRK did not require a law to raise an army since its ideology had attracted a lot of people to join. The PRK, however, did adopt a conscription law in 1989. Why? This is perhaps what explains the role of indoctrination and propaganda. One may argue that indoctrination and propaganda did indeed play a role in raising a large army for the PRK so much so that it did not need a conscription law. On the other hand, if one is to argue that the PRK had forced people into the army without a law before 1989, then we may ask why did it need such a law in 1989? Why did the PRK not just practice its lawless conscription? This book speculates that before 1989, the PRK did not have any problem recruiting its soldiers while after 1989, it tried to force conscription in order to overwhelm the CGDK after the Vietnamese left. A lack of confidence might also explain the existence of the conscription law in 1989.

175 Murray Hiebert, "Phnom Penh Prepares for Vietnamese Withdrawal: Standing Alone," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29 June 1989. Even the CGDK's sponsors started to be wary of a possible Khmer Rouge's victory, to the point where the US Department of State declared that the US may no longer support the CGDK seating at the UN if it included the Khmer Rouge. See Nayan Chanda, "US Policy Shifts Reflect Domestic Concern Over Khmer Rouge Victory, For Reasons of State," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 August 1990.

## 5 When the sky falls and mountains are flattened

### The CGDK made operation graduation

#### 5.1 Diplomacy with (huge) armies: prelude to the 1989 CGDK's combined offensive

To alleviate international pressure and, incidentally, to boast of the PRK's progress, the ministers of foreign affairs from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam met in 1982 to announce the beginning of the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. Vietnam was true to its promise, and in July 1982, a small contingent left Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> In May 1983, the 6th Division left Cambodia. During the following five years, the PAVN continued to withdraw in three more steady streams (June 1984, May 1985, and May 1986) although these withdrawals included only small units or units that were deployed in strategically insignificant areas. In fact, by this time, the frail Vietnamese economy had started to crack, and a new leader had come to power in the Soviet Union. On 28 July 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev made a historic speech at Vladivostok, outlining his new foreign policy. He announced an overall reduction of Soviet troops in Mongolia, along the border with China, in Southeast Asia, and in the Warsaw Pact states.<sup>2</sup> One significant point in the Vladivostok speech was Gorbachev's reference to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, which he said could be used as the model for the withdrawal of the PAVN from Cambodia.

In November 1987, the PAVN began the largest withdrawal up to that date. Two divisions and other units, totaling 20,000 men, bid farewell in their last parade in Phnom Penh, while the PRK invited an international press corps to witness the event. This first, large-scale withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1987 was aimed at opening the way for two of the most important factions to meet. On 2 December 1987, Premier Hun Sen met with Prince Sihanouk at Fère-En-Tardenois, France. This meeting was curious because the factions agreed to meet before their military power could be tested on the battlefield. Yet, one can certainly assume that the bitter relationship between Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge was one major factor pushing for the meeting. Premier Hun Sen noted in his book, *10 Years of Cambodia's Journey*, that the meeting was not sanctioned by the CGDK's sponsoring countries, who actually did their best to prevent the meeting from taking place.<sup>3</sup>

The meeting was important for the PRK because, for the first time, Prince Sihanouk, the symbol of Cambodian sovereignty, did not exclude the PRK from negotiations (as would have been the case had the Prince still considered the PRK as a mere Vietnamese puppet). Moreover, both sides agreed, albeit implicitly, that the problem was a Cambodian problem, not an international one. This issue (internal versus external) became one of the most confusing issues of the negotiation process. Internally, this was a civil war between the Khmer factions. Externally, the Vietnamese intervention was condemned by the United Nations, the majority members of which voted consistently to brand that intervention as an aggression on a sovereign nation (Democratic Kampuchea). Both the PRK and the CGDK (most ostensibly the Khmer Rouge and the sponsoring countries) had opposite views on this issue.

The PRK wanted to link the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia to the possibility of Khmer Rouge return. In other words, the PAVN could be allowed to stay in Cambodia as long as the Khmer Rouge could still return to power. Simply, the reason for this fear of the Khmer Rouge was genocide and bloody purges. This was indeed an implicit link between the internal problem (Khmer Rouge) and the external problem (Vietnamese presence). But at the same time, any political solution to the Cambodian conflict was bound to involve an international guarantee of the political agreement, perhaps through an international control mechanism. The PRK opposed that link. It argued that the international mechanism could only resolve the external problem (Vietnamese presence and withdrawal) but not the internal problem that needed to be resolved by the Khmer factions themselves, without intervention from foreign players. To put it more simply, the PRK thought that the internal problem was linked to the external problem, but an international control mechanism could only solve the external problem, not the internal one.

Predictably, the CGDK's and the sponsoring countries' position was the exact opposite. The ASEAN, in particular Singapore, argued that the internal and external problems were intrinsically linked in the sense that the internal problem (Cambodian civil war) was caused by an external one (Vietnamese aggression on Democratic Kampuchea).<sup>4</sup> As such, an international control mechanism would be needed to resolve both the internal and external problem. In this view, the distinction between the internal and external problem was artificial. Vietnam must withdraw its forces from Cambodia unconditionally and then the civil war problem was to be solved by an international control mechanism. This view, in fact, dismissed the PRK's argument that the Vietnamese intervention was precipitated by the Khmer Rouge's genocide and bloody purges in the first place. For the PRK, the CGDK and ASEAN did know what really happened in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 but they chose to ignore this for political expediency.

But behind the facade of these public and supposedly reasonable positions, both sides harbored Machiavellian hidden agendas. If there was

internal negotiation between the factions without foreign involvement, the Khmer Rouge would be isolated because no other Khmer factions really liked them. Genocide still cast a dark shadow over the Khmer Rouge's political future. The PRK knew this and it sought to exploit the discord to its advantage. Hence the PRK's dual proposal: linking the PAVN's presence with the Khmer Rouge's return, but opposing an international control mechanism in resolving the conflict. The Khmer Rouge and the sponsoring countries (most importantly ASEAN and China) knew this and worked hard to prevent the non-communist factions of the CGDK from accepting the PRK's proposal. With communism on the decline and its allies in extreme difficulties, the PRK knew that any eventual international committee working on the Cambodian negotiation would have little sympathy for its cause and plight. The PRK, in turn, must prevent this at all cost.

But at Fère-en-Tardenois, it was simply premature to forcibly advance one's position for fear of eliminating the possibility of future negotiation. Both Prince Sihanouk and Premier Hun Sen knew this and they chose to play it safe. Both leaders agreed to a four-point communiqué:<sup>5</sup>

- 1 The conflict must be resolved politically.
- 2 The conflict would be resolved by the Cambodian factions themselves.
- 3 With agreement from all parties, an international conference should be convened to guarantee the effective implementation of the agreement.
- 4 Both parties must agree to hold further meetings.

Global events further pushed for a negotiated solution to the Cambodian conflict. On 15 May 1988, Gorbachev made the first official visit by the Soviet leader to Beijing since 1959, and during this meeting, Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping agreed that there should be a political solution to the Cambodian conflict for the sake of the Cambodian people and the Southeast Asian region.<sup>6</sup> On that very day, the Soviets started their large-scale withdrawal from Afghanistan. A few days later, Hanoi announced the second largest withdrawal of troops from Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> From June to December 1988, roughly 50,000 PAVN troops, as well as the Supreme Command Headquarters of the PAVN's Cambodia contingent, left the country. From 15 to 21 December 1988, six divisions were withdrawn, leaving only one-fourth of the original strength in Cambodia. Finally, on 26 September 1989, all Front headquarters left Cambodia.

This withdrawal was influenced by two major factors, namely the Sino-Soviet rapprochement and the economic decline of both Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Since the withdrawal was inevitable anyway, Vietnam and the Soviet Union decided to take advantage of it. While they had asked before for the link between the PAVN presence in Cambodia and the possibility of the Khmer Rouge return, now Vietnam implemented a risky gambit. By totally withdrawing its forces from Cambodia before eliminating the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam (and the PRK) had now forced the ball into the CGDK's

court. Because there were no more Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, the CGDK's legitimacy was now put into question. Thus, the latter was forced into negotiation with the regime that they had always branded as a puppet regime.

In the middle of these waves of PAVN withdrawal, the Khmer factions came together to negotiate the end of the war as promised by the Sihanouk—Hun Sen meeting in Fère-en-Tardenois. Indonesia played a major role in bringing the factions together and organizing the negotiation under the “cocktail party” format known as the Jakarta Informal Meeting or JIM. The first JIM or “JIM I” was convened in Bogor city to the south of Jakarta from 25 to 28 July 1988. That was the very first time that all four factions to the conflict had come together to meet at the negotiation table. To this day, we still did not know the full details as to what actually happened during the meeting, but one can speculate that the PRK achieved most of its goals because the Khmer Rouge blocked the issuance of a joint communiqué. In the public statement to the press after the meeting, Ali Alatas, the Indonesian foreign minister noted the following important points:<sup>8</sup>

- 1 All factions agreed to seek a political settlement of the conflict.
- 2 The meeting acknowledged the link between the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia (and its withdrawal) and the prevention of the return of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal policy. All external actors must cease support of arms to the Khmer factions and a calendar of the implementation of an international control mechanism must be established.
- 3 All factions agreed to continue the negotiation.

By looking at the second point, it was clear that the PRK had just achieved a diplomatic coup and in the words of Premier Hun Sen, “JIM seems to have eliminated the Pol Pot genocidal regime politically.”<sup>9</sup> In his book, Premier Hun Sen seemed elated when recounting what happened during JIM I.<sup>10</sup> It seemed that the non-communist factions of the CGDK and many major countries expressed their concerns about an eventual return of the Khmer Rouge. The PRK's propaganda that “the world must cease support for the genocidal Khmer Rouge” had actually materialized. The Vietnamese intervention was now seen as a necessity and the Khmer Rouge's return became an impasse to the political settlement. It was also clear that the Khmer Rouge simply could not accept this, and accordingly, was the reason why it moved to block the issuance of a joint communiqué. This was unexpected, and displeased the ASEAN countries and China no end, resulting in both going into damage control mode.

The foreign intervention had its intended effects. From 17 to 19 October 1988, “JIM II” was convened once again at Bogor but failed to make any progress due to the ASEAN proposal to protect Democratic Kampuchea's international legal standing. Concurrently, the ASEAN argued for an

international control mechanism to deal with the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia. Ostensibly, Singapore made the case that the internal problem (Cambodian civil war) was precipitated by the external condition: the Vietnamese aggression that provoked the war of national liberation by the Cambodian nationalists.<sup>11</sup> By this logic, the PRK was a mere puppet government and could not have any significant role in the resolution of the conflict without an international control mechanism.

But luck was on the PRK's side. The international opinion seemed to have shifted significantly against the return of the Khmer Rouge after JIM I and the new developments during JIM II had not reversed this trend. This forced the hand of many sponsoring countries, at least on the rhetorical level. Later that year, in November, Chinese Premier Li Peng declared in Bangkok that the Khmer Rouge would not be allowed to unilaterally control the Cambodian administration.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, ruling out the Khmer Rouge return was not to be equated with support for the PRK. This was no clearer than the failed negotiation during another meeting after JIM II, namely the second Sihanouk—Hun Sen meeting in Fère-en-Tardenois on 7 and 8 November 1988. During that meeting, everything that had been agreed in Bogor (JIM I) and other meetings was completely reversed. Prince Sihanouk advanced an impossible proposal: dismantling the PRK's leadership (retaining only the bureaucracy) before the political settlement could take place.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps as a reciprocal signal, Premier Hun Sen issued an equally impractical proposal: the PRK would control the election process and the working of the international control mechanism.<sup>14</sup>

With the results of JIM I and JIM II being demolished by the second Fère-en-Tardenois meeting, France intervened and used its influence to organize a meeting in Jakarta from 2 to 3 May 1989.<sup>15</sup> Everyone seemed to have agreed in principle that the Khmer Rouge would not control the new government unilaterally and that a Cambodian mechanism was needed to resolve a power-sharing mechanism. Consequently, another difficult issue arose at Jakarta. All sides seemed to agree that there would be a supreme institution that would act as the ruling body during the transition period (between the political settlement and the formation of a new Cambodian government). The PRK demanded a bipartite government (thus giving 50 percent of the voice to the PRK and 50 percent to the three factions of the CGDK combined) while the CGDK demanded a quadripartite government (thus the PRK's share was limited to 25 percent while the three parties of the CGDK would hold a total of 75 percent). This became an impasse.

At this point, diplomatic efforts started to stall. The major issue remained the disagreement over the power sharing mechanism (bipartite versus quadripartite) of the transition government. Other than that, the diplomatic efforts looked like a roller coaster. Whatever agreement was reached on one day could easily be rejected the next day. The frustrated Premier Hun Sen described one of the meetings in 1989 as “making one step forward, two

steps backward” because the results from previous meetings were ignored or even rejected altogether.<sup>16</sup>

After the initial optimism during the first Fère-en-Tardenois meeting in 1987, all hopes had faded and the Cambodian negotiators understood that they had walked into an uncertain future. With repeated history of factions reneging on the agreements, one can certainly question if the negotiators themselves really counted on the agreements to be implemented. Gradually, it became clear that all agreements had been just empty talks, and only the battlefield could be a better arbiter of peace. Everyone had just walked full circle.

This frustration and confusion is what characterizes the literature on the diplomatic negotiation of the Cambodian conflict. At some point, the literature stopped asking “why” the actors did certain things and instead the researchers only asked “what” had happened. This was because the actors changed their position too often to be rationally explained by any theory. This book offers an alternative explanation. By September 1989, the four Cambodian factions combined had a total force of no less than 400,000 men, not yet committed in any serious campaign. With such a huge military force, why would one not gamble for maximum gains? Honoring a compromised agreement was just unthinkable before the test of battle. Perhaps, with huge armies in reserve on all sides, it was only natural for diplomacy to be ineffective. As diplomacy stalled, the factions went to the battlefield to decide whose political proposition was more “reasonable and practical.”

## 5.2 Battambang province: easy picking, hard swallowing

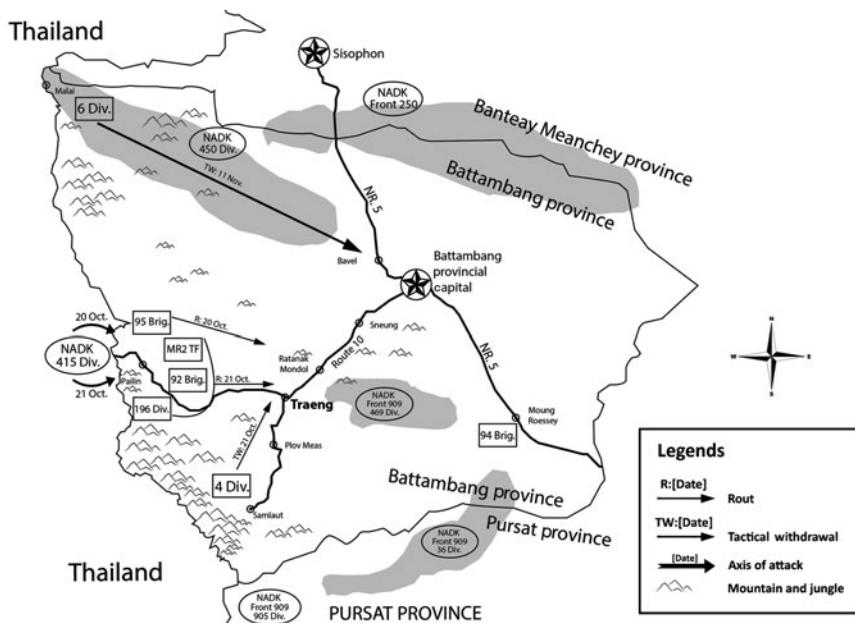
This chapter analyzes the CGDK’s operations in 1989 immediately after the last Vietnamese unit left Cambodia. Not all Cambodian provinces were hit equally, and only the Western provinces were hit the hardest. And among these Western provinces, only Battambang and Banteay Meanchey bore the brunt of the attack. Kampong Thom was an atypical province in that it was far away from the border but was still attacked by a large CGDK formation. The CGDK’s offensive in 1989, from the PRK’s perspective, was akin to a Khmer aphorism: “the sky falls and mountains flattened.” But the KPRA’s People’s War strategy made it hard for the CGDK to capitalize on its graduation to the conventional level. In order to defeat a numerically superior KPRA, the CGDK must “fix” some forces while massing to attack others. But in the end, the KPRA’s territorial units proved too much for the CGDK.<sup>17</sup>

The CGDK had prepared its ammunitions caches for a war that would erupt simultaneously along the five hundred-plus kilometers border between Cambodia and Thailand. Less than a week after the last Vietnamese troops departed Cambodia, the CGDK launched the long-awaited grand offensive on all fronts. Despite the large areas covered in its operational concept, however, two provinces would bear the brunt of the offensive: Battambang and Banteay Meanchey.

Due to its huge size, the PRK divided the province and created the new province of Banteay Meanchey in early 1988. Still, Battambang retained three of the six mobile divisions: the 4th, 6th, and 196th Divisions. But these three divisions would still find it hard to cover the entire Cambodian-Thai border in Battambang. Rugged terrain, mountains, and dense jungle further complicated any attempts to close off the border.<sup>18</sup>

The 196th Division was garrisoned in the town of Pailin. Unlike the positions of 4th and 6th Divisions, which were in the middle of the jungle, Pailin was an old town. The gemstone quarry, perhaps the largest in Cambodia, had made this frontier village a booming town since the French colonial era. The 196th Division put its headquarters in a towering three-story house in the middle of the town.<sup>19</sup> The regiments and the independent brigades put their outposts in fortified positions around the town and on higher ground. The division also had tanks, armored personnel carriers, heavy troop carriers (which can tow heavy artillery), anti-aircraft guns, and heavy artillery.<sup>20</sup>

Several reasons combined to weaken the 196th Division. First, to fill the gaps after the PAVN left, the division detached one regiment to create the 92nd Brigade, and another one to create the 95th Brigade. Thus, when the brigades were created, Pailin had only one regiment remaining, and even



Map 5.1 Battambang battlefield.

Source: author.

though more troops were supposed to be augmented to replace the other two detached regiments, there was not enough time to build a cohesive unit. Moreover, the division was too far away from the 92nd and 95th Brigades to be able to contact or intervene to help each other in hard times.<sup>21</sup>

The second weakness related to the exploitation of the gemstones. As soon as the KPRA took control of the area, private companies (established after the PRK reformed its economy in 1987) already lined up for a piece of the potential profit. To some extent, the KPRA allowed private companies to exploit the resources. It would not be a surprise if the Khmer Rouge, as a guerilla army, had spies working as gemstone laborers, who certainly would have observed the military situation in the town.

The third problem was attrition due to the elements, disease, and enemy actions. Pailin was a remote town, and to travel there from the Battambang provincial capital required large trucks that could traverse the road rigged with countless potholes resulting from landmines. If they survived the landmines, then they had to meet the Khmer Rouge's ambushes. Moreover, any casualties would have to be evacuated to the provincial capital. In 1989, morale was quite low for those who were stationed in the jungle along the Cambodian-Thai border. Many soldiers who traveled to the rear never returned. When the NADK stepped up its attacks in September 1989, the KPRA had to send units from Military Region 2 and the Battambang PMC to reinforce the positions.<sup>22</sup>

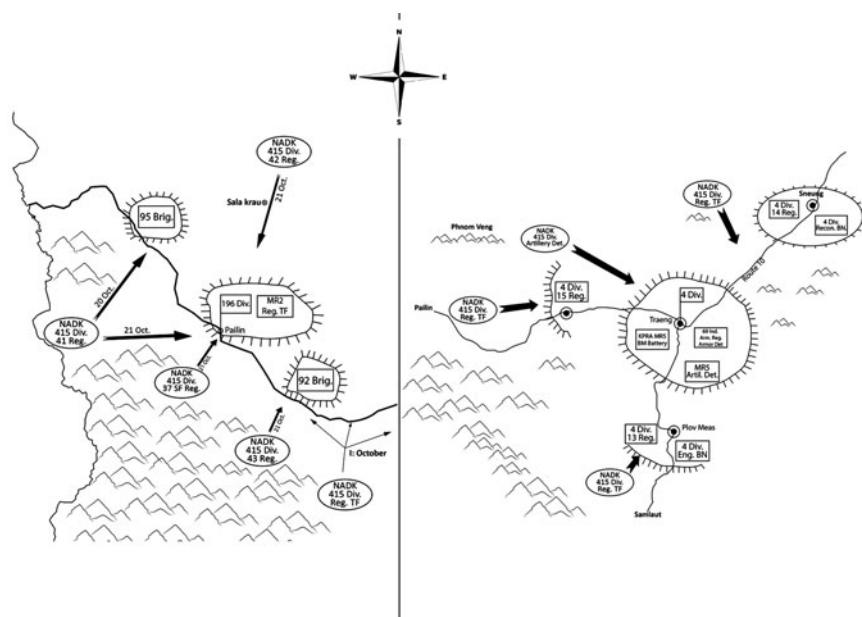
Observing these weaknesses, the NADK did not launch a frontal attack on Pailin but decided to destroy the 196th Division by attrition. The first objective was to suppress and isolate the 196th Division and the surrounding brigades with constant artillery and mortar fires so that they could not mobilize to relieve each other. Second, the NADK pushed the ambushes to the limit by putting maximum effort at interdicting any effort by the KPRA to send relief units from the provincial capital. According to a former NADK regimental commander, Route 10 was interdicted twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week.<sup>23</sup> At any time and any suitable place along the road, there were always ambush squads waiting for the KPRA's reinforcement column.<sup>24</sup>

The NADK's 415th Division, which was a full division and had earned its experience fighting Vietnam in 1978, carried out the attack on Pailin. The NADK's 415th Division had three infantry regiments: the 41st, 42nd, and 43rd Regiment and the 37th Special Forces Regiment. The NADK's first wave of attack centered on the KPRA's 95th Brigade, which had been stationed to the northwest of Pailin. Constant shelling further worsened the KPRA's already low morale. As one former NADK commander noted, "the 60mm mortar was so effective against the entrenched troops on the high ground."<sup>25</sup> On 20 October 1989, the NADK's 41st Regiment dislodged the KPRA's 95th Brigade from all the mountains and hills, which were devoid of almost all vegetation due to constant shelling. As the 95th Brigade retreated, it left the rear of the 196th Division wide open.<sup>26</sup> The NADK's

41st Regiment also captured several heavy artillery pieces from the KPRA brigade, which it then used against the 196th Division.

While some elements of the NADK's 415th Division still could not advance from the front because the headquarter of the KPRA's 196th Division was strongly fortified, the NADK's 37th Special Forces Regiment penetrated from the rear. In the meantime, the NADK's 41st Regiment attacked from the west and the NADK's 42nd Regiment attacked from the northern route which had been left open by the retreat of the KPRA's 95th Brigade. The KPRA's 92nd Brigade was also under the attack and was pinned down by the NADK's 43rd Regiment. On the morning of 21 October, the NADK's 37th Special Forces Regiment overran the artillery positions of the KPRA's 196th Division and pushed to the divisional headquarters. Hammered on all sides, the KPRA's 196th Division could stand no more of this torment and collapsed into a full rout. Twenty-six days after the last Vietnamese units left Cambodia, Pailin fell.<sup>27</sup>

The rout of the 196th Division and the 95th Brigade isolated the 92nd Brigade, which saw no point in staying behind. And then the reinforcements



Map 5.2 Campaign in Pailin (left) and the Defense of Traeng (right). The Khmer Rouge's NADK assaulted the positions of the KPRA's 196th Division simultaneously, which induced the panic and collapse of the latter with minimal losses on the NADK side. At Traeng, however, the strong field fortification dealt heavy blows on the NADK's infantry assault. The PRK held Traeng until the end of the war.

Source: author

from Military Region 2 and Battambang PMC retreated in a disorderly manner to Ratanak Mondul district, a dozen kilometers to the east. These units also left behind all of their heavy equipment as well as warehouses full of ammunitions of all types.<sup>28</sup>

In a video taken by the Khmer Rouge after they captured the town, the following could be counted as the minimum of the equipment that fell under the Khmer Rouge's control: two T-54 tanks, three bulldozers, ten heavy trucks, ten 120mm "D30" artillery pieces, two 85mm artillery pieces, four 37mm anti-aircraft guns with double-barreled variants (which could be used to defend against infantry and lightly armored vehicles), two 130mm towed artillery pieces, a large number of heavy machine guns, recoilless guns, RPGs, light machine guns, and a division's warehouse full of ammunitions. A former NADK regimental commander claimed that it took one month to transport all of the ammunitions out of the warehouse.<sup>29</sup> In line with the KPRA's logistics concept, these resources were expected to support one full division for an entire rainy season.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, when the 196th Division routed, not only did it create a gap between the 4th and 6th Divisions, but it also gave the Khmer Rouge a massive amount of firepower.

### 5.3 The defense of Traeng

In late October 1989, an officer of the KPRA's 4th Division recalled that the sound of artillery bombardment could be heard in the distance to the north, in the direction of Pailin.<sup>31</sup> On the night of 21 October 1989, the 4th Division received an emergency coded telegram from the party ordering its withdrawal. When the 196th Division collapsed, the PRK was shocked and finally revised its strategy. According to some accounts, the PRK shifted its strategy from defending the border to defending the population centers.<sup>32</sup> The 4th Division was instructed to withdraw within less than twenty-four hours to Traeng village, west of Battambang, which commanded the junction of the roads leading to both Pailin and Samlaut.<sup>33</sup> The telegram stressed that the division must destroy on site any heavy equipment it could not bring back to the rear.

The commander of the 4th Division was perplexed and asked for clarification, to which the chief of general staff of the KPRA answered: "Why don't you withdraw, the 196th was already gone, they'd [the NADK] cut off your rear road [avenue of retreat]."<sup>34</sup> The 4th Division complied and destroyed loads of heavy weapons and matériels they could not bring with them. On 27 October, the Khmer Rouge's NADK and civilian support troops marched into Samlaut unopposed, although Western media wrongly reported, based on Khmer Rouge propaganda, that they had fought to seize Samlaut from the 4th Division, just like what they had done to the 196th Division in Pailin.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the 6th Division withdrew to consolidate its forces in Bavel district, north of Battambang's provincial capital on 11 November. "The General Staff Headquarters said that we must withdrew

to Bavel and even then they did not think we will be able to hold out; they were prepared to lose Bavel as well, but we fought to defend our position successfully," the former commander of the 6th Division claimed.<sup>36</sup>

But unlike Traeng, Bavel had no major road that the Khmer Rouge could use to channel its troops to attack Battambang provincial capital. Traeng remained the key battlefield. On 29 October 1989, as the NADK was in full control of Samlaut, the officers of the KPRA's 4th Division rallied in the terrace of Traeng pagoda and prepared a defensive plan. The division was tasked to defend Traeng, a road juncture that connected Battambang provincial capital to both Pailin and Samlaut. The 4th Division arrived at Traeng more or less unscathed, having around three thousand men distributed in one full regiment, two reduced regiments (see previous chapter), and nine functional battalions.<sup>37</sup> It was to partner with a regiment of the 196th Division who had just arrived at Traeng. The 4th Division then discovered a grim reality: its partner regiment belonging to the 196th Division, led by a hero officer of Battambang province, only had twelve men remaining.<sup>38</sup> Such was the extent of the damage that the 196th Division had suffered. The 196th and the units operating in Pailin suffered, on average, around a 50 percent attrition rate, mostly due to desertions during the rout.

Traeng was the last key terrain before reaching Battambang's provincial capital. If the NADK was to be stopped, it had to be done at Traeng. If the 4th Division collapsed here, then the PRK would risk losing Battambang province. Sensing the potential danger, Premier Hun Sen came personally to Battambang to prepare the defensive plan and boost troop morale. There was a lull in combat for a few months. A conversation with a former NADK regimental commander revealed that after capturing Pailin, the shells of the captured artillery were sent to China and only after a two-month wait that the additional ammunitions arrived, allowing the NADK to launch major operations to try to capture Traeng and push to Battambang provincial capital.

The delay also allowed for the re-equipping and refitting of the KPRA's 4th Division at Traeng, since all of its heavy weapons were destroyed at Samlaut. The commander rushed to build strong fortified lines in preparation for the eventual NADK onslaught. The KPRA's MR4 and the General Staff Headquarters sent four T-54 tanks and a battery of BM-13 and BM-21 multiple rocket launcher system to shore up the defense of Traeng.<sup>39</sup> With such heavy weaponry under its tactical control, the 4th Division prepared strong fortifications to protect the road junctures at Traeng and array its forces accordingly.

The divisional headquarters was located at the road junction in Traeng, on a slightly elevated position. The 13th Regiment, considered to be the division's vanguard assault regiment, was deployed with the division's Combat Engineer Battalion to protect the road leading to Samlaut. The 15th Regiment, the only full regiment of the division, was deployed to protect the road leading to Pailin. The 14th Regiment and the division's Reconnaissance Battalion

were deployed to the rear, about five kilometers behind the divisional headquarters, perhaps as a fallback defensive line in case the division faltered at Traeng.

The division was also upgraded with a key weapon that proved decisive when the attack came. It got six anti-aircraft guns, three twin-cannon 23mm ZU-23 anti-aircraft guns and three single-cannon 37mm M1939 61-K anti-aircraft guns.<sup>40</sup> The divisional commander assigned one single-cannon and one twin-cannon anti-aircraft gun to the 15th Regiment who defended the road to Pailin because that was where he believed the NADK onslaught would commence. The rest of the anti-aircraft guns were deployed at the divisional headquarter to defend against possible NADK tank assault.<sup>41</sup>

But the NADK did not plan on using tanks for this operation. Two tanks were not enough to launch a blitzkrieg, nor could they be decisive in a methodical combined arms doctrine. Consequently, the NADK adopted the high-caliber, drive-by shooting doctrine by putting the tank on Phnom Veng, a hill located ten kilometers from Traeng and fired harassing shots on the headquarter of the 4th Division below.<sup>42</sup> In late January 1990, the NADK 415th Division started to lay siege to Traeng, bombarding it with thousands of rounds per day. In early February 1990, perhaps judging that the KPRA 4th Division had been sufficiently weakened by the bombardment just like what happened to the 196th Division at Pailin, the NADK launched infantry assault.

According to the description by a former KPRA officer, the assault was akin to a mini-version of the infantry assaults of World War I. For ten days, the NADK would start shelling every position of the 4th Division around 9AM and as the artillery bombardment abated around 3PM, the infantry assault began.<sup>43</sup> The NADK attacked all regiments of the KPRA's 4th Division simultaneously to make sure that they could not reinforce each other, a tactic the NADK used to great effect against the KPRA's 196th Division at Pailin. The roads between these KPRA units were also interdicted. However, the defensive work of the 4th Division started to pay dividends. The division constructed strong field fortifications with zigzag patterns and interlocking fields of fire. The division also reinforced its fortifications with clusters of bunkers that housed a variety of heavy weapons. The anti-aircraft guns were recalibrated to fire directly on the NADK infantry, with devastating effect.

By the tenth day, the NADK assault included not only the soldiers of the NADK's 415th Division but also a special forces unit and a transportation unit. In the last assault, the KPRA officers detected a panic in the NADK ranks with the foot soldiers refusing to launch yet another frontal assault. A former KPRA officer went so far as to claim that the 4th Division's communication unit intercepted a radio chatter in which the NADK soldiers, heavily suppressed by the hail of bullets from the direct-fire anti-aircraft cannons, shouted back to their commanders: "Comrade! How could you order us to attack from the front again when all before us had fallen?"<sup>44</sup> According to the same KPRA officer, to exacerbate this panic, the divisional

headquarters of the 4th Division then ordered the battery of BM-13 and BM-21 multiple rocket launchers to fire for effect, thus scattering the NADK formation.<sup>45</sup>

The assault was finally broken when the KPRA discovered the body of a fallen NADK soldier who they (the KPRA) identified as a deputy commander of the 415th Division because he carried an AK assault rifle and a K-54 pistol commonly used by high-ranking officers.<sup>46</sup> An examination of the *People's Army* archive revealed that the same information was also reported in the news.<sup>47</sup> The author's interview with former NADK regimental commanders, however, failed to verify the identity of that deputy divisional commander. What we can conclude was that the assault was broken when the NADK lost its senior field commanders.

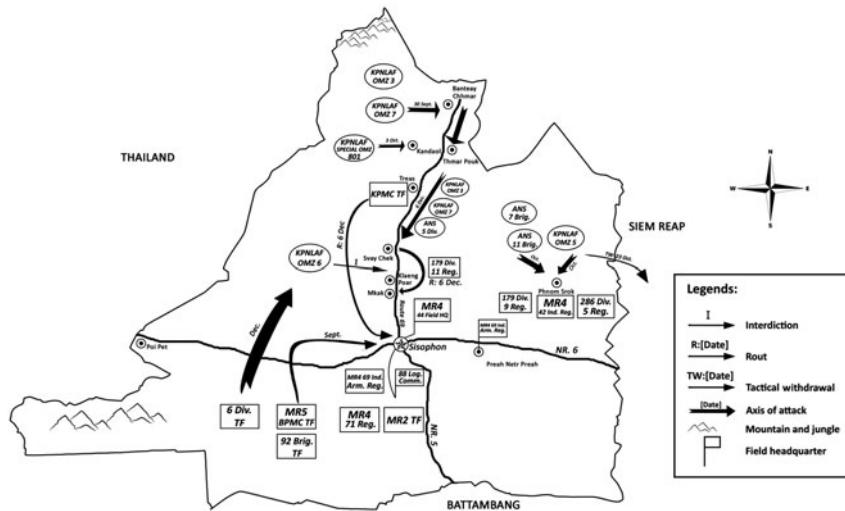
The 4th Division defended Treng in the district of Ratanak Mondul with difficulties but it held on.<sup>48</sup> The positions were still shelled by the NADK and the divisional headquarter was still under harassing fire from the NADK tanks at Phnom Veng, but the 4th Division was not in any danger of collapsing. Both sides pushed back and forth to try to capture more territories, but neither succeeded. The Khmer Rouge's attempt to cut the road between Ratanak Mundol and the provincial capital did not succeed and the 415th Division suffered heavy losses. Eventually, the front stabilized around Traeng in Ratanak Mundol district.

#### **5.4 Banteay Meanchey: the locals who dared say no to the Central**

Banteay Meanchey province was the northern part of Battambang. Sisophon district (present day Serei Sophorn, Khmer for “Blessing Beauty”) became the capital of the new province. Defense-wise, the geography was quite complicated. Major district towns lined up almost in a straight line from north (the Cambodian-Thai border) to south (the interior): Banteay Chhmar, Tmar Pouk, Treas, Svay Chek, Klaeng Por, M’kak, and the provincial capital Sisophon. Such geography posed unique defensive problems because of the long lines of communication that the CGDK could cut into pieces.

Banteay Meanchey was the hub of the KPNLAF's activities. It controlled many camps along the border in this area, and its field headquarters was located right at the border crossing. The KPNLAF, not surprisingly, committed the bulk of its forces in the province: OMZ2, OMZ3, OMZ5, OMZ6, OMZ7, and the 801st Special Regiment (later upgraded to become 1st Brigade) of the Special OMZ. In other words, the KPNLAF committed a total force of an equivalent of two KPRA divisions. It also received reinforcements from ANS 2nd, 7th, and 11th Brigades as well as the 2nd Division.<sup>49</sup>

The KPRA, on the other hand, had the 179th Division, which divided its forces for the defense of the areas around Svay Chek and Phnom Srok. It also received reinforcements from MR2 (one regiment each from Prey Veng,



Map 5.3 Campaign in Banteay Meanchey Phase 1.

Source: author.

Kampong Cham, and Svay Rieng); the newly established 42nd Regiment of MR4 (it combined two Banteay Meanchey battalions and two Svay Rieng battalions); 69th Independent Armor Regiment (MR4); 71st Regiment (MR4); and a staggering sixteen local battalions (after six of the original twenty-two were transferred to the 286th Division, the 179th Division and the 42nd Regiment).<sup>50</sup>

The operations in Banteay Meanchey can be divided into two stages. The first stage started with the CGDK offensive and continued until the capture of Svay Chek district. This phase lasted from September to December 1989. The operations transitioned to Phase 2 when the CGDK's attack stalled after the capture of Svay Chek and after their debacle at Phnom Srok. Phase 2 was the KPRA's counteroffensive.

#### 5.4.1 Phase 1: first axis of the KPNLAF onslaught—Svay Chek

The operational history in Banteay Meanchey was one of CGDK's rapid gains with few major force-on-force engagements. The NCR launched a two-pronged attack on Banteay Meanchey: one axis advanced from Thmar Pouk to Sisophon, and another one attacked from the Phnom Srok area. Bad tactics also played a part in the KPRA's early losses. While the KPRA had more soldiers, as late as 1989 it still adhered to the border defense strategy in which it tried to defend as much territory as possible. As a result, most outposts became undermanned and isolated. To compensate, the KPRA relied on its T-54 tanks, which it would dispatch to any outpost that was threatened.

The tanks usually travelled alone with no infantry support in order to increase its mobility but also because the guerrillas had no effective anti-tank weapons. According to Conboy, by the time the KPNLAF initiated its offensive, however, it had received modern anti-tank weapons from Singapore.<sup>51</sup> The two main systems were the Swedish-designed 84mm “Carl Gustav” recoilless rifles and the German-designed 67mm Ambrust “Crossbow,” which were the “one-shot, one-kill” anti-tank weapons of the time and that Singapore had purchased the license to produce. Singapore, Conboy claimed, had skirted the restrictions placed by the countries of origin not to export the weapons to a third country currently embroiled in conflict.<sup>52</sup>

Two days after the last Vietnamese units left Cambodia, the KPNLAF started its offensive by moving the forward field headquarters deeper into the province. On 30 September, OMZ3 and OMZ7 moved along the first axis of advance to attack and occupy the deserted Banteay Chhmar village. The village had a twelfth-century temple ruin, which was symbolic for both sides. After the capture of the village, the KPNLF published a leaflet boasting its success, but unfortunately, smugglers also moved in to loot the temple’s artifacts.<sup>53</sup>

Refusing to accept the loss of that village, the KPRA forward field headquarters in Banteay Meanchey predictably dispatched three T-54 tanks from Tmar Pouk district (south of Banteay Chhmar) to reinforce the position. In the Cambodian civil war, guerrillas generally fled when they saw tanks, but not that day. According to Conboy, the first tank fell victim to the Carl Gustav anti-tank recoilless rifle, which blew off its turret and exploded the magazines inside.<sup>54</sup> The second tank hit a mine, which destroyed its track, immobilizing it. The crews deserted. The third tank was wedged in a pothole along the road, and the crews also deserted. As the KPNLAF moved into Thmar Pouk, the district town was already deserted.<sup>55</sup>

With CIA support, the KPNLAF was also equipped with radio interception gear, and with that, it learned that the KPRA’s units at Kondaol, yet another district town to the south of Thmar Pouk, were panicking.<sup>56</sup> The position was not well fortified because it was used primarily as an artillery fire base. The KPNLAF’s 801st Special Regiment, which was one of the elite units, attacked the position, and on 3 October, it entered the town unopposed. Because of the success, the 801st Special Regiment was augmented with new recruits to become the 1st Brigade, and the commander was promoted to brigadier general.<sup>57</sup>

The KPNLAF then used Kondaol as its own fire base and started constant shelling on its next prize, the district town of Svay Chek. But, as the KPLNAF moved south, the towns were bigger and the defenses denser and better fortified. Svay Chek proved to be a tougher nut to crack. As October passed into November, Svay Chek still held strong even though the morale of the troops inside the bunkers was at its nadir.<sup>58</sup> OMZ3 and OMZ7 kept pressure on from the northwest, while OMZ6 interdicted the road between the provincial capital Sisophon and Svay Chek in order to isolate the latter.<sup>59</sup>

For at least three weeks, the KPNLAF had been shelling Svay Chek, the position of the 11th Regiment, a vanguard unit of the KPRA's 179th Division, with as many as 1,000 rounds per day on average.<sup>60</sup> November passed into December, and the fortified position still held strong despite the low morale. But then, on 6 December, one fateful round from a 76.2 mm field gun destroyed the regimental command bunker and killed everyone in it.<sup>61</sup> The soldiers of the 11th Regiment then hastily abandoned the position.

On 7 December, the KPNLAF moved into Svay Chek. The loss of Svay Chek effectively isolated Treas, where many units, including one whole reinforcement battalion from the Kandal PMC on a morale-building mission, were routed without a single shot fired. The KPNLAF commandos who were interdicting Route 69 from Svay Chek to Sisophon captured the battalion's political commander (of the Kandal PMC) and sent him to the border.<sup>62</sup> Three KPRA's tanks were also captured by the KPNLAF. According to a former regimental commander of the 179th Division, the political officer from the Banteay Meanchey PMC tried to rally the troops using loudspeakers mounted on a BTR-60 armored personnel carrier. But he was fired upon by his own troops, although no one was injured from the incident.<sup>63</sup>

#### *5.4.2 Phase 1: second axis of the KPNLAF onslaught— Phnom Srok*

While the CGDK achieved significant successes in the first axis, the second axis was a story of gross tactical blunder. The risk inherent in the KPNLAF's operations was that they could be outflanked by the KPRA from both the east and the south of the Thmar Pouk-Sisophon axis of advance. To the east, the risk was somewhat mitigated by the NADK's 518th and 519th Divisions, the ANS, and the KPNLAF's OMZ5, which jointly attacked in the Phnom Srok and Preah Netr Preah areas. To the south, the KPNLAF could reasonably expect the Khmer Rouge to pin down most of Battambang PMC's troops and the KPRA's mobile divisions in the province. As the war progressed, both risks became more pronounced.

Phnom Srok and Preah Netr Preah were twin districts and were only divided by national road 6 and both were equally threatened. The most important strategic value that a capture of both districts could offer was the ability to control national road 6; thus allowing the CGDK to cut off the lines of communications between MR4 and MR5. Moreover, there was no major town between Phnom Srok and the Cambodian-Thai border to the north, which made it quite an easy target for the CGDK.

As the PAVN left Cambodia, the KPRA scrambled to reinforce the district. In mid-October, the KPRA mobilized the 42nd Regiment (belonging to MR4), which had just been upgraded with armor and heavy artillery, from Poipet to defend the Phnom Srok district. MR4 also deployed the field headquarters of the 69th Independent Armor Regiment to Preah Netr Preah

district. The regiment stationed two T-54 tanks in Phnom Srok and often sent two or three more from across National Road 6 whenever Phnom Srok was threatened. The last unit that reinforced the district was a reduced regiment from the Prey Veng PMC. In late 1989, the KPRA shifted this regiment elsewhere and replaced it with the 5th Regiment (battalion-size task force) from the 286th Division in Ouddar Meanchey. As the Vietnamese departed in September 1989, therefore, Phnom Srok had a total of one regimental and one battalion task force (42nd and 5th, respectively) of infantry, five district companies, two T-54 tanks on site from the 69th Independent Armor Regiment, and an artillery detachment at Preah Netr Preah (from the 12th Artillery Regiment of MR4) tasked with supporting Phnom Srok itself. The CGDK attacked Phnom Srok regardless.

Phnom Srok's district capital suffered three attacks during this period, two of them on a large scale. According to the former commander of the Phnom Srok district's military, the first attack started a few hours before dawn in early September 1989.<sup>64</sup> It was a small attack, albeit one that was shocking and quite unsettling for the local KPRA units. First, the attack exposed the vulnerability of the district because it occurred even before the Vietnamese withdrawal and one Vietnamese platoon still remained in the district.<sup>65</sup>

Second, the district's military estimated that about one hundred and fifty men were involved in the attack but only sixty were Khmer Rouge soldiers and the rest were thought to be civilians from the Khmer Rouge-controlled villages. It was speculated that the latter group came for looting.<sup>66</sup> This could create a volatile situation if the local people took matters into their own hands and retaliated or possibly lynched the looters in a future encounter. Above all, the KPRA must stop the attack from happening again. And given what happened along Route 69 to the west, one could reasonably expect a second and far larger attack on Phnom Srok. To prevent such an eventuality, MR4 drew up an elaborate defensive plan to counter the CGDK attack on the district.

Phnom Srok's district center, the target of the operation, was thought to be built on the foundation and within the terrace of an unknown ancient citadel. Consequently, the houses were arranged in a rectangular-shaped plot of land approximately one kilometer square. More importantly, the area was surrounded by a moat, the traces of which are still visible today. While this obstacle was not impossible to cross, it did restrict the movement of any troops trying to cross it. Moreover, the area around the district center was flat land, devoid of any thick vegetation that could offer significant cover and concealment to both the attackers and those who tried to break out from the district center. In other words, the area offered advantage only to any defenders who were willing to stay put and defend in place. Any avid military observer would not miss this point and this topographical problem did not escape the attention of the KPRA planners.

But this knowledge alone was not the key to KPRA success. The key was intelligence. True to its People's War concept, the KPRA's intelligence network

was expansive among the populace. It seemed that the “5-in-1 villager” concept finally paid off. Towards the completion of the Vietnamese withdrawal, the district’s military began to pick up actionable intelligence that the three factions of the CGDK would attempt to launch united operations to try to capture the district. All sources pointed to an imminent attack involving “hundreds” of CGDK troops from the three factions combined.<sup>67</sup>

The KPRA started to prepare a virulent defensive plan. First, the district would receive armor and artillery support from the 179th Division, the 42nd Regiment, the 12th Artillery Regiment, and the 69th Independent Armor Regiment. Second, the district’s military, in conjunction with the 5th Regiment task force of the 286th Division had arrayed their forces in the trench just in front of the moat surrounding the district center. These forces were armed to the teeth. For every five meters along the rectangular front, there was one emplacement consisting of one mounted PK(M) heavy machine gun (7.62 x 55 mm) and a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) with plenty of ammunition.<sup>68</sup> The trench was also filled with combatants carrying standard rifles and, in some cases, they were equipped with the “DK” recoilless rifle guns as well. The defenders also had a large number of the DH10 anti-personnel, directional, fragmentation mines that they deployed just in front of the trench.<sup>69</sup> The trench line was dug in front of the moat, meaning that the CGDK had to push through the trench first and then traverse the moat to get into the district.

Inside the district center, two T-54 tanks of the 69th Independent Armor Regiment remained on stand-by support. The chief of staff of the district’s military led a group composed of district troops and militia to occupy an ambush position northeast of the district center. The group could also act as an intervention unit, and in case any portion of the trench received heavy attack, this group could move to envelop the attacker and relieve the pressure on that section of the trench.

On 21 October 1989, while the KPNLAF was still besieging Svay Chek, and the NADK captured Pailin, the ANS committed the 7th and 11th Brigades to a second attack on Phnom Srok. The attack came before dawn on that day. The attackers came with a purpose. Unlike usual raids, this operation involved at least five hundred fighters from all three CGDK factions. Each soldier was also heavily armed, carrying one standard rifle and a grenadier-type gun (either an Ambrust anti-tank gun or a rocket-propelled grenade).<sup>70</sup> This was not a guerrilla band, but a conventional army that had received generous support from Western and regional patrons. Even this CGDK task force was an infantry unit, they carried enough firepower to counter any armor threat the KPRA posed. Number-wise, the CGDK task force also had a reasonable chance of success. Roughly five hundred fighters with this amount of firepower could easily overrun some narrow sectors along the KPRA defensive line, who could muster only around three hundred fighters at the district center. The CGDK commanders seemed confident that their morale and firepower could compensate for the lack of the 3-to-1

numerical superiority required to attack a prepared position. Previous victories along Route 69 encouraged overconfidence.

However, the CGDK lacked local intelligence. A strong defensive position was not the only hallmark of the KPRA's plan at Phnom Srok. The KPRA actually planned to trap the CGDK task force, something that the latter was unaware of. The KPRA would allow the CGDK to move in and then would move to surround the CGDK and defeat them in detail.<sup>71</sup> Without strong local intelligence network, the CGDK soldiers walked right into the trap.

Around 5am on 21 October 1989, the CGDK assembled in a village southwest of the district center and then infiltrated to the south of the district before launching a two-pronged frontal assault on the KPRA line. A group of CGDK troops (from the non-communist factions) laid ambush along the road to the east of the village. Finally, roughly sixty Khmer Rouge soldiers prepared to attack from the northeast. Fortunately for the KPRA, the militia unit and the district troops who were supposed to wait outside the district center also chose to wait to the northeast.

One hour into the intermittent firefight, the CGDK's attacking waves still could not piece the KPRA line. But the KPRA district's military abandoned their barracks which was in front of the trench and all soldiers moved to the trench instead in order to deceive the CGDK into believing that the line was about to break. Undaunted, and perhaps encouraged by the sight of the KPRA abandoning the barracks, the CGDK continued to press forward. To make the deception believable and encourage the CGDK to commit, the district's military and the militia to the northeast started to move back to the village. It was then that the Phnom Srok militias discovered the CGDK unit (east of the district center) that was waiting to ambush a possible KPRA retreat from the district center. An inconclusive firefight ensued and the chief of staff of the KPRA district's military was slightly injured. But the CGDK unit had now lost its element of surprise.

Toward lunchtime, the KPRA along the southern sector of the trench started to implement the final step of their deception plan. They started to open a gap in the trench line along the southern road that led into the district center. For the CGDK, this was a repeat of its success story and the fragility of the KPRA's unit cohesion as well as morale. As the trench was now pieced, or so it seemed, the bulk of the CGDK troops poured into the district center. After a while, the KPRA started to move back and re-established the contiguous defensive line, cutting off any means of escape for the CGDK troops. The CGDK (mostly the ANS) troops were now in a meat grinder. Two T-54 tanks with infantry support were in the district center and around the district center was the KPRA trench which still held strong. According to the former commander of the district's military, the DH10 anti-personnel, directional, fragmentation mines were repositioned to the other side of the trench to counter the CGDK breakout.<sup>72</sup>

The CGDK troops inside the district center now realized they were trapped. Now, to break out of the trap, they had to cross the moat and face



*Figure 5.1* Entrance to Phnom Srok district (2015). This was the southern road from which the CGDK troops were lured into the town by the KPRA. Note the moat on both sides of the road.

Source: author's collection.

the deadly DH10 mines all the while braving the unrelenting hail of bullets from the KPRA in the trench. The reinforcement from the east also failed to get through to help their trapped comrades because they were pinned down by the KPRA militia led by the chief of staff of the Phnom Srok district's military. How about the Khmer Rouge, one might ask? First and foremost, they still had to shatter the KPRA district's military and militias to the northeast, something that could not be done without sustaining heavy casualties.

But the former commander and the former chief of staff of the Phnom Srok district's military noted, jokingly

The Khmer Rouge decided not to commit their forces. They were actually happy to hear that the bulk of the ANS was now trapped so they did not need to attack because the attack could not have made any difference anyway.<sup>73</sup>

One has to note that this is not about the Khmer Rouge's complacency or fear of combat, but rather the lack of unified battlefield command and control despite the CGDK's political honeymoon at the top. It seems as if Abdul Gaffar Peang-Meth's concept of Joint Military Command (albeit only

among the non-communist factions) was sorely missed. In this case, it cost the CGDK dearly, particularly the non-communist factions.

Around 2pm, the KPRA's 69th Independent Armor Regiment dispatched two more T-54 tanks to help the local forces reinforce its success. The district's military mounted several loudspeakers on the tanks to call to the trapped CGDK soldiers to peacefully surrender. Seeing that they were completely trapped and that all of their attempts to break out were violently repulsed, the CGDK soldiers decided to surrender. The surrender occurred in three waves and when the dust was settled, the KPRA counted two hundred and twenty-nine CGDK soldiers surrendered and wounded, most of whom belonged to the ANS.<sup>74</sup> Some of the soldiers who were involved in the previous episode of looting were lynched by the local people. But most of them were spared because Premier Hun Sen sent an explicit order for the KPRA soldiers to guard the prisoners.<sup>75</sup>

The next day, the *People's Army* newspaper published an article where it claimed the KPRA had captured three hundred CGDK prisoners and killed over a hundred.<sup>76</sup> The former commander of the district's military, however, was unsure about the casualties, perhaps because the CGDK might have retrieved most of the dead. The local KPRA units counted only twenty-one bodies of the CGDK soldiers that littered the battlefield but concurred that the actual number might be significantly higher.<sup>77</sup> In an unprecedented move, the *People's Army* newspaper also published a short article on page one praising the Banteay Meanchey PMC and MR4 for the success at Phnom Srok.<sup>78</sup> For the newspaper's entire existence, this was perhaps the only case where a military unit or command received explicit citation on the front page.

The next day, the KPRA broadcasted the story of their success on national television, showing that it had detained hundreds of prisoners. The KPRA claimed to have put five hundred ANS soldiers out of action, among which three hundred were taken prisoner and one hundred killed.<sup>79</sup> The majority of the modern Ambrust anti-tank weapons as well as a large number of rockets were also seized during the operation.

The victory was one of the brightest KPRA victories in the early stage of the war, and rightly so because this was not the end of the nightmare for the CGDK. The ANS lost the majority of the combat power of their two brigades. One CGDK unit, the KPNLAF's OMZ5 could barely escape the ordeal but the worst was yet to come. A district adjacent to Phnom Srok was Kralanh district, which belonged to Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province. It had received word that a KPNLAF unit was now retreating into its territory after the debacle at Phnom Srok. The district militias, even without support from the KPRA's conventional units, drew up a plan to intercept the KPNLAF unit.

As the KPNLAF's OMZ5 attempted to flee east, it ran into an interconnected militias' defensive system made up of three villages of Kralanh district in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province.<sup>80</sup> In the process of retreating



Figure 5.2 The ANS/ANKI (FUNCINPEC) soldiers captured by the KPRA after the debacle at Phnom Srok. The number that can be gleaned from the examination of these photographs suggests a match with the number obtained from interview with former KPRA soldiers and the claim reported in the *People's Army* newspaper. The number is between 200 and 300.

Source: SPK.

without reinforcement and without logistics support, OMZ5 struggled to find a temporary hiding place. Instead, it was violently dislodged by the militias in that area. Then, it had to find a new place, only to be attacked by another militia controlling the new area. In all, for two excruciating days, OMZ5 was attacked and cut into pieces three times in succession by the joint actions of the militias in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province. The *People's Army* newspaper made frequent mention of this local tactic in which the hamlets, villages, and sometimes districts took the initiative and formed an interconnected system to counter the CGDK's infiltration. The term in Khmer is "*sompoan sahak phum prayut*," which can be literally translated as "union of inter-hamlet offensive."<sup>81</sup>

Most of the time, the newspaper mentioned that this tactic was used to interdict the CGDK's supply lines. The attack on OMZ5 was the only instance in which the militias could intercept and badly damage a conventional unit. The militias killed one of OMZ5's regimental commanders and badly weakened the remaining regiments, thus effectively neutralizing OMZ5's combat effectiveness.<sup>82</sup> Just like the ANS brigades, OMZ5 ceased to exist as a conventional unit.

In this instance, the CGDK was not a "People's Army." Without a local intelligence network, the CGDK, especially the two ANS brigades walked right into the trap. The KPRA made short work of the two ANS brigades.



*Figure 5.3* Stone monument in Preah Netr Preah district, in front of the former headquarter of the 69th Independent Armor Regiment, commemorating its valor and contribution during the war.

Source: author's collection.

In just one night, the ANS lost the majority of its combat power in Banteay Meanchey. The ANS could still attack as small units, but it could no longer engage in large-unit actions. The episode showed how bad tactical choices and a lack of popular support at the local level effectively ended the CGDK operations prematurely in the first phase of the operation in Banteay Meanchey. With the strong support of the population and strong local intelligence network, the KPRA's defensive plan went like clockwork.

So ended the first phase of the operations in Banteay Meanchey. The future was bleak for the CGDK. With the two ANS brigades and OMZ5 out of action, the KPNLAF's eastern flank was under threat despite the gains in the first axis of advance. The KPNLAF could rely on the Khmer Rouge, but despite the mutual understanding, perhaps the best thing it could hope for was only that the Khmer Rouge would not attack its troops. Direct combat support from the Khmer Rouge was perhaps too high a hope. Then, operations entered their second phase. The transition point occurred when the KPRA made a key operational decision to deal with the CGDK after the fall of Svay Chek.

#### *5.4.3 Phase 2: “My home, my war”—the KPRA’s counteroffensive*

On the KPNLAF's side, after the capture of Svay Chek, the general staff wanted to consolidate the gains and push further to Sisophon, thus totally liberating the province. Conboy noted that the commander of the 1st Brigade, however, was concerned that his troops who had been fighting constantly since March were exhausted and could not move further. He requested a two-day break, which the chief of staff reluctantly granted.<sup>83</sup> The troops returned to the border camps to spend time with their friends and families. Then, Conboy lamented, most of them did not return, and worst of all, the communication team intercepted the message from the KPRA in Sisophon, which had panicked and would have abandoned the provincial capital had there been another attack. This was how Conboy explained the missed opportunity and the end of the KPNLAF's operations in Banteay Meanchey, which were its major activities in the war.<sup>84</sup>

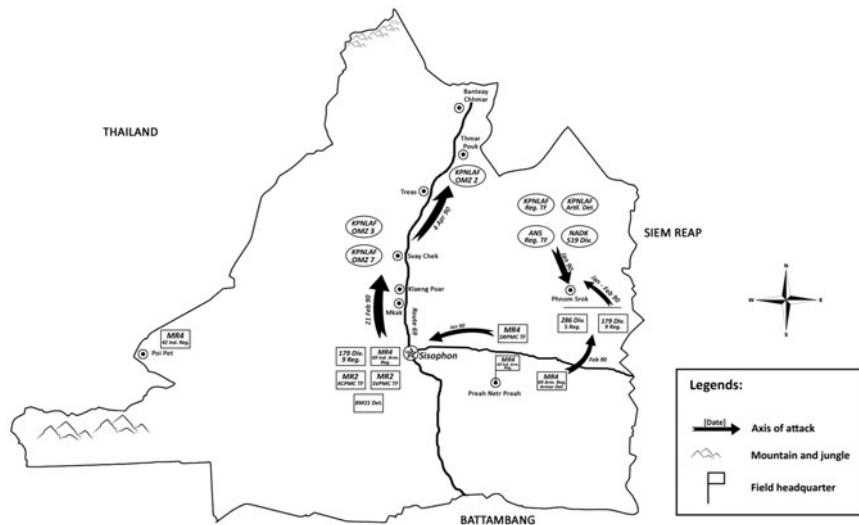
Conboy's account on this point is puzzling. The 1st Brigade (formerly the 801st special regiment), OMZ2, OMZ3, OMZ6, and OMZ7 all participated in the operations; one can also count the ANS brigades and OMZ5. To claim that the KPNLAF did not have enough troops to fight after a string of easy victories is unclear. He did not explain how soldiers the size of two divisions simply vanished after the capture of Svay Chek. Surely the 1st Brigade did not return, and OMZ5 suffered defeat, but the KPNLAF still had four OMZs left. He also did not provide any reason as to why the men of the 1st Brigade did not return. Did one whole brigade simply vanish into thin air? Even if that was the case, what happened to the other OMZs?

When the author of this book talked to former KPRA officers, however, they provided one main reason, or rather speculation, as to why the KPNLAF's offensive fell apart. They argued that the KPNLAF functioned based on financial rewards for successful operations (as Conboy would concur, especially the financial incentives provided by the Thai liaison officers). Consequently, the financial gains became more important than the larger political objective. When the KPNLAF captured Svay Chek, they came upon a large pile of abandoned equipment and matériels: three 122mm artilleries, two 85mm field guns, one BTR-60 armored personnel carrier, two T-54 tanks (of which the ANS 2nd Division later claimed one), one hundred mortars and light weapons, four Zil transport trucks, one UAZ command jeep, and four thousand cases of ammunitions.<sup>85</sup> In a raging war, there was no shortage of buyers. The former KPRA officers speculated that the reasons why the men of the 1st Brigade as well as other units did not return was because they were busy trading these war spoils when they took their leave to the border.<sup>86</sup>

On the KPRA's side, there was a very important development. Just like what the KPNLAF had intercepted, after the fall of Svay Chek, the PRK did indeed panic despite the success in Phnom Srok: it still lost almost half of the province.<sup>87</sup> With the KPNLAF now staring down from Svay Chek, some sixteen kilometers from Sisophon, the PRK knew it was in a dire situation. According to some accounts, the Central Committee started to contemplate abandoning the provincial capital, thus surrendering the whole province.<sup>88</sup>

While this proposition considered Banteay Meanchey to be a lost cause at that point, it was not a defeatist proposition, however. As the story went, the KPRA General Staff Headquarters began to assess the options, and one prominent suggestion was to lure the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC to move in and establish their headquarters in the provincial capital, which they would have surely done for propaganda purposes. Then, the KPRA would level the city with all the artillery in its arsenal. Given the town's small surface area, which was surrounded by hills, the artillery bombardment would have destroyed the entire non-communist resistance's leadership.<sup>89</sup> While the idea sounded good, it ignored countless assumptions that would have to hold true for the strategy to work.

The Central Committee was torn between defending the province and abandoning it. As the Central Committee debated about what to do next, the local officials in Banteay Meanchey province learnt about the "lost cause" proposition. In an unprecedented move, the local party officials in the province vehemently opposed any plan to abandon the province, and they vowed to defend the province to the bitter end.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps impressed with the determination of the local officials, the Central Committee decided to defend the province. The chief of general staff came to Sisophon to take command of the operations, while the minister of homeland defense maintained supervision and paid numerous visits to the areas.<sup>91</sup> MR4, MR2, and the KPRA General Staff Headquarters all deployed their forward field



Map 5.4 Campaign in Banteay Meanchey Phase 2.

Source: author.

headquarters to Sisophon. The KPRA also deployed the newly acquired multiple-rocket launcher system, the dreaded BM-21, to the province. In the meantime, units from Siem Reap and even those from the besieged Battambang province were rushed in to counter the KPNLAF's offensive while units from MR2 and the local units maintained defensive positions north of Sisophon. Thus, the operations in Banteay Meanchey entered what we can characterize as the second phase of the operations.

While the defense of Sisophon was upgraded significantly, Phnom Srok and Preah Netr Preah were still threatened. This time, only a few months after their debacle, the CGDK attacked again, both at Phnom Srok and Preah Netr Preah. The Khmer Rouge became active in the second stage. It is not entirely clear why the Khmer Rouge did not join the attack with OMZ5 and the ANS brigades in the debacle in October 1989, but ideology and absence of effective unified command might be the reasons. After the ANS and the KPNLAF were suppressed, the Khmer Rouge threw in its forces, led primarily by the NADK's 518th and 519th Divisions (each was an equivalent of a KPRA's regiment) in early January 1990 (the non-communist factions also joined the fight). With the KPNLAF (or what was left of it) still controlling Sway Chek and staring down on Sisophon, the capture of Phnom Srok could potentially wrestle control of the province from the PRK. The KPRA then called upon a regiment from the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC to coordinate with the 5th Regiment of the 286th Division in order to relieve the two districts.<sup>92</sup>

The Khmer Rouge 519th Division led the attack on Phnom Srok. This time, the combined strength of the CGDK reached upward of a thousand men and two T-54 tanks. It looked like the CGDK had learnt from their mistake. Interestingly, it seemed the CGDK now tried a new tactic of combined arms warfare. They now had tanks and could use them in joint attacks with the infantry and artillery. Unfortunately, while combined arms warfare usually works with frontal assault characterized by fast-paced, ferocious actions, these were not things the CGDK was willing to gamble given their bitter experience months ago on the same battlefield.

Despite numerical superiority, it refused frontal assault, a type that did not work well months ago. Instead, the Khmer Rouge-led CGDK task force seemed to adopt a puzzling tactic. At the time, it was not clear as to what kind of tactic they were implementing and we could only guess that through another similar case that happened in a district called Anlong Veng (Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province) in 1994. In 1994, the government launched a major campaign to capture a major Khmer Rouge stronghold along the border. When the government was controlling Anlong Veng, the Khmer Rouge carried out skirmish attacks on government soldiers, which led the latter to chase the Khmer Rouge far into the jungle. At one point, the Khmer Rouge managed to ambush and destroy the accompanied tanks, making the surviving government soldiers run frantically back to the base, creating a panic that led the whole force to withdraw in a disorderly manner.

Perhaps, if the analogy is correct, the CGDK in early 1990 tried to draw the two T-54 tanks of the KPRA from the district center, ambush it, and even if the KPRA did not panic, the CGDK would push its mechanized force into the district center and put up strong defensive work. Thus, the Khmer Rouge, despite having enough combined strength to satisfy the 3-1 numerical superiority in attacking a prepared defensive position, declined frontal assault. Instead, it shelled the villages around the district center and torched many houses on fire.<sup>93</sup>

In an interesting display of combat discipline, the district did not send out its own tanks to respond to the Khmer Rouge skirmish. If the tanks were tasked to defend the district center, then they would stay in the district center. The local KPRA units seemed to have avoided any broad interpretation of the order. Skirmishes did occur but it was between the KPRA infantry units and the Khmer Rouge's mechanized forces. After three days, the commander of the district's military had decided to adopt the conventional wisdom "a strong offense is a strong defense," but even so, he did not use the two tanks in the district center and instead asked for reinforcements from the 69th Independent Armor Regiment. The latter sent five T-54 tanks, which combined with the infantry units in the district, pushed the CGDK to the border between Banteay Meanchey and Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey. The Khmer Rouge and other CGDK forces dispersed but the KPRA could still capture forty-two prisoners at the end of the chase.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, at Preah Netr Preah, the CGDK also could not gain anything significant. The battlefield was in disarray, but a battalion task force from Siem Reap “fought 21 operations in 20 days” in January 1990 in order to relieve the units of the 179th Division from the CGDK siege.<sup>95</sup> The NADK unit leading the attack appeared to be the 519th Division who attacked at the same time as the 518th Division did in Phnom Srok.<sup>96</sup> According to a former commander of the KPRA task force (who was the chief of staff of the Siem Reap PMC at the time), his unit fought against the NADK every day for twenty days. On one of those days, according to the former commander, his unit seized the objective in the morning and transferred it to one of the 179th Division’s units. The latter unit then lost it in the afternoon on the same day, which prompted the task force to launch its twenty-first attack. In late January, the NADK’s 612th Division attacked Varin district in Siem Reap, forcing the battalion task force to withdraw. But it was too late for the Khmer Rouge, as the latter had already achieved what it was ordered to do in Banteay Meanchey.<sup>97</sup>

When the Siem Reap PMC’s task force withdrew back to Siem Reap, the soldiers claimed they encountered an event that characterized the KPRA’s conduct during the war.<sup>98</sup> They came across a village where a water buffalo became berserk and charged at the soldiers. Unable to stop the buffalo by peaceful means, the commander ordered the buffalo shot. The owner of the buffalo was then contacted, and the task force paid the owner 100,000 riels, and in exchange, the soldiers took the dead buffalo, which later became their dinner. There is no way to either substantiate or refute this claim. But the fact that the KPRA was able to trap the ANS brigades and then moved units from one province across treacherous terrain to relieve the mobile division in another province perhaps does tell us something about the relations between the KPRA and the populace.

The destruction of the two ANS brigades, the disaggregation of OMZ5, and the suppression of the Khmer Rouge 518th and 519th Division began to unravel the KPNLAF’s design on Banteay Meanchey. Compounding this problem was the men of the KPNLF’s 1st Brigade, who did not return from the border after the capture of Svay Chek. This left OMZ3 and OMZ7 as the only two units capable of functioning as conventional units. But now they were greatly outnumbered. The CGDK launched two major attacks on the Phnom Srok-Preah Netr Preah area but failed in both and got nothing in return. To make matters worse, the units they committed to the attacks suffered severe attrition to the point where they could not function as effectively as they had done a few months before.

Even the besieged KPRA in Battambang had sent its task force to relieve Banteay Meanchey. Immediately after the fall of Banteay Chhmar in September, Battambang contributed a hastily assembled, battalion-size task force to fight with other units to prevent any attempt of the KPNLAF to attack Sisophon. It did not stay long, however, due to its own problems at home. Part of the task force came from the 92nd Brigade, which was

stationed in Pailin. It was at this time, when the task force was still fighting in Banteay Meanchey, that the understrength 92nd Brigade and 196th Division were routed from Pailin (see previous section).

To avoid a similar problem, the KPRA turned to the 6th Division. In the second stage of the operations, a regiment-size task force from the 6th Division led by the divisional commander himself, a fresh graduate from the Mikhail Frunze military academy in the Soviet Union, was sent to reinforce Banteay Meanchey. The main objective was to eliminate the KPNLAF units that held the high ground near Sisophon in order to suppress their artillery.<sup>99</sup> After the 6th Division's task force achieved its objective, the forward field headquarters of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters in Sisophon then unleashed its firepower from the newly acquired, dreaded BM-21 "Grad" multiple rocket launcher system, which devastated the remaining forces of OMZ3 and OMZ7. A former officer of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters claimed that after the war, when he queried what happened, the former KPNLAF officers in the unit admitted that in some places, the BM-21 salvo virtually destroyed a whole battalion.<sup>100</sup>

In February 1990, a KPRA joint task force started to counterattack to destroy KPNLAF's remnants in the province. On 21 February, the KPRA recaptured Svay Chek. At 9.30am on the morning of 4 April 1990, a joint task force composed of the 9th Regiment (belonging to the 179th Division), a Svay Rieng Regiment, a Kampong Cham Regiment, and MR4's 69th Independent Armor Regiment pushed their mechanized forces into Thmar Pouk district. Men of the KPNLAF's OMZ2 ran away after a brief firefight, leaving behind hundreds of 80mm mortar shells, mines, and a few Carl Gustav anti-tank recoilless rifles. The KPRA wasted no time in hauling them onto their trucks and continued the journey. On the same day, they tore down a KPNLF banner that read: "Thmar Pouk sub-provincial office."<sup>101</sup> The KPNLF had enjoyed having its own capital city for only six months.

Thus ended the best attempt by the non-communist forces to win the war. While they could manage to occupy parts of the province with their victories in the early phase of the operations, they were more occupied with creating a liberated city and with amassing the spoils of war than with the long-term strategy. Conboy lamented that when they created the sub-province of Thmar Pouk, the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC had disagreed about who would be the new governor.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, a lack of popular support and the failure of the CGDK factions to cooperate with each other were probably the causes that led the operations in Banteay Meanchey to fizzle away.

The KPRA perhaps had learned from its previous experience and did not try to hold Thmar Pouk. Instead, it withdrew to consolidate its forces at Svay Chek after the brief capture of Thmar Pouk. After the war, Prime Minister Hun Sen often mentioned that this counterattack was designed primarily to shore up his bargaining position at a negotiation in Jakarta at the time. The meeting in Jakarta was not much influenced by the counterattack since it happened too close to the meeting. The KPRA's counterattack



*Figure 5.4* KPRA soldiers load the BM-13 multiple rocket launcher system in Kampong Thom.

Source: SPK.

at Thmar Pouk produced maximum effect a few months later when Prince Sihanouk agreed to meet with Premier Hun Sen in Japan in June 1990. We shall examine this issue in detail in the next section.

## **5.5 Kampong Thom province: “If I flee, where do you suggest I go?”**

### ***5.5.1 The political context***

The Khmer Rouge had always been a supporter of the idea that any eventual political negotiation between the parties to the Cambodian civil war needed to be a four-party talk. To a large extent, the other two CGDK factions also acquiesced with this idea because if there was to be a future power-sharing scheme, the CGDK would control three-fourths of the pie while the PRK would receive only one-fourth.

Predictably, Premier Hun Sen of the PRK has always been categorical that any eventual power-sharing scheme had to be done on a bilateral basis, meaning the three CGDK factions needed to divide among themselves 50 percent of the “power pie” while the PRK enjoyed the other 50 percent. While this issue seemed to be one of whether the CGDK should be treated as a single faction or three factions joined together, at the heart of the issue

was the formula of the future power-sharing scheme. Ultimately, there could be no solution to this disagreement about dividing up the pie, and the parties went to the battlefield to decide.

Around June 1990, the CGDK combined offensive stalled, and the non-communist resistance groups took heavy losses. The KPRA's victory over the non-communist resistance in Banteay Meanchey was probably its most important achievement. Perhaps it did not grasp this at the beginning of the operations, but the non-communist army was the center of gravity for the CGDK: its loss threatened the unity of the CGDK itself. By mid-1990, the non-communist resistance had already lost the majority of its combat power. If the situation continued, the Khmer Rouge would ultimately emerge as the only able military force of the CGDK capable of launching significant operations. Accordingly, the Khmer Rouge would be in a position to command the direction of future political negotiations.

Such a conclusion certainly did not escape Prince Sihanouk's attention. This realization also dented any hope of Prince Sihanouk being able to force a political solution by way of military means. Thus, in fear of the Khmer Rouge's further dominance of the CGDK, Prince Sihanouk agreed to meet with Premier Hun Sen in a Japanese-hosted summit in Tokyo in June 1990, under the auspices of the Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu.<sup>103</sup>

The meeting was not the first time the factions had come to the table, however. The first meeting can be traced back to 1987, when bilateral talks had taken place. Yet, in all of those meetings, parties often reneged on the agreements they had made. Because military power had not yet been tested on the battlefield, factions failed to agree to anything significant. As we have seen, Indonesia, in particular, was very active in creating a series of dialogues known as the Jakarta Informal Meeting, although the Indonesian foreign minister often found himself lonely at the meetings, for the reason that factions often boycotted the proceedings.<sup>104</sup> But it was a different story in Tokyo. The Tokyo summit was a breakthrough because Premier Hun Sen and Prince Sihanouk agreed to the concept of a UN-sponsored election and the establishment of a supreme body made up of representatives from all conflicting parties that would rule the country during the transition period.

Moreover, under the Thai initiative, and sponsored by Japan, the summit was a bilateral talk between Prince Sihanouk and Premier Hun Sen. This was effectively an acknowledgment that the CGDK was a single faction, a proposition that Premier Hun Sen was pushing. Prince Sihanouk's action in this case was not surprising, however, given the past intrigue between the Khmer Rouge and the Prince. The Khmer Rouge needed to stop this momentum.

Predictably, Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge) was not in any mood to celebrate. The meeting between Prince Sihanouk and Premier Hun Sen was scheduled for 4–5 June 1990. Khieu Samphan of the Democratic Kampuchea faction did not plan to attend the meeting. Instead, on 29 May 1990, at 11.20pm, Khieu Samphan sent an ominous letter to Prince Sihanouk

calling for the cancellation of the Tokyo summit.<sup>105</sup> Prince Sihanouk, in response, issued an open letter with a defiant stance in the ANS Bulletin. The Prince reaffirmed his intention to meet with Premier Hun Sen but also warned that he (Prince Sihanouk) would not be responsible for any attempt to sabotage the summit by the Khmer Rouge's military action on the battlefield.<sup>106</sup>

On 4 June 1990, the very day that the Tokyo summit was scheduled to start, the NADK led a combined military force and struck the Staung district (located on National Road 6) in Kampong Thom province. Staung was the second battlefield after Pailin that saw the KPRA units routed. The ANS had a locally based unit in this area, the 15th Brigade. Unlike the ANS units along the Cambodian-Thai border, the 15th Brigade was not yet committed and had therefore not been significantly weakened. Elements of the KPNLAF's OMZ7 were also reported to be active in the province. We do not know, based on the current state of documentation, whether the non-communist resistance received orders from their political leaders to attack Kampong Thom (which would have been a case of backstabbing the PRK in Tokyo) or if they acted as a result of their own local initiatives. Both of these forces were indigenous to the province, as the commanders were native to Kampong Thom. This suggested that their participation might not have been sanctioned by the political apparatus. While they did participate, however, the Khmer Rouge's NADK was the main player.

Staung fell; but when that did not stop the Tokyo summit, the NADK tried another target, the Kampong Thom provincial capital.

### *5.5.2 Military operations*

Kampong Thom was a pivotal town at the heart of the country. First, National Road 6 ran through the provincial capital. It then continued to Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey, the headquarters of the KPRA's MR4. Second, also at Kampong Thom was Route 12, which was the only access to the besieged Preah Vihear province. Should the Khmer Rouge capture the provincial capital, they would be able to cut the lines of communication between the capital city and MR4 as well as isolating Preah Vihear province. Kampong Thom itself was more or less isolated: National Road 6 was the only viable road into the provincial capital, and any attempt to attack from Steung Treng or Kratie would require the KPRA to travel off-road into the Khmer Rouge's guerrilla countryside.<sup>107</sup>

To the northwest of the province was a district called Staung, which sat on National Road 6 on the way to Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey. It was a troubled spot, as the CGDK made repeated raids on the district, and the PRK frequently lost control. Just before the Tokyo Summit, the PRK sent a large task force to defend the town: the 5th Division task force (from Preah Vihear), the 15th Naval Infantry Division (in spite of the name, its actual strength was a regiment), the 9th Division task force (a unit composed of

cadets), the 7th Division task force, the MR4 task force, and a task force from MR2.<sup>108</sup> Some of Kampong Thom's provincial battalions also participated in the defense of Staung. The Central Committee of the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party issued a clear order: any lost territory must be swiftly recaptured.<sup>109</sup>

To make sure that all these distinct units could work together, the Ministry of Homeland Defense assigned the chief of the Political Directorate from Phnom Penh to oversee the operations. However, this new commander did not have any prior experience in combat operations: he had been the political officer who oversaw all political matters on behalf of the ministry. Perhaps the KPRA thought that the position itself would command respect from all units. But once he arrived at the battlefield, he committed two major tactical errors. First, he did not prepare any integrated defensive plans in order to coordinate the actions of these different units who had never worked with each other before. Second, and perhaps the most crucial, he positioned his field headquarters right at the frontline, perhaps to observe the battlefield clearly, even though the troops that he commanded had already reached almost corps level by Cambodian standards.<sup>110</sup>

The Khmer Rouge's new attack on Staung came on the very day that the Tokyo Summit started. The Khmer Rouge attacked one battalion that occupied the flank of the 5th Division task force, which, in turn, occupied the flank of the entire formation. The battalion was routed, and then, seeing this rout, the division task force itself began to falter. No command came from the headquarters, which were under heavy shelling by the Khmer Rouge, a direct result of positioning the headquarters too close to the frontline. As the headquarters could not issue any commands, the 5th Division began to follow its fleeing battalion, and then the entire formation collapsed. All forces retreated to the vicinity of San Kor village, a dozen kilometers north of the provincial capital.<sup>111</sup>

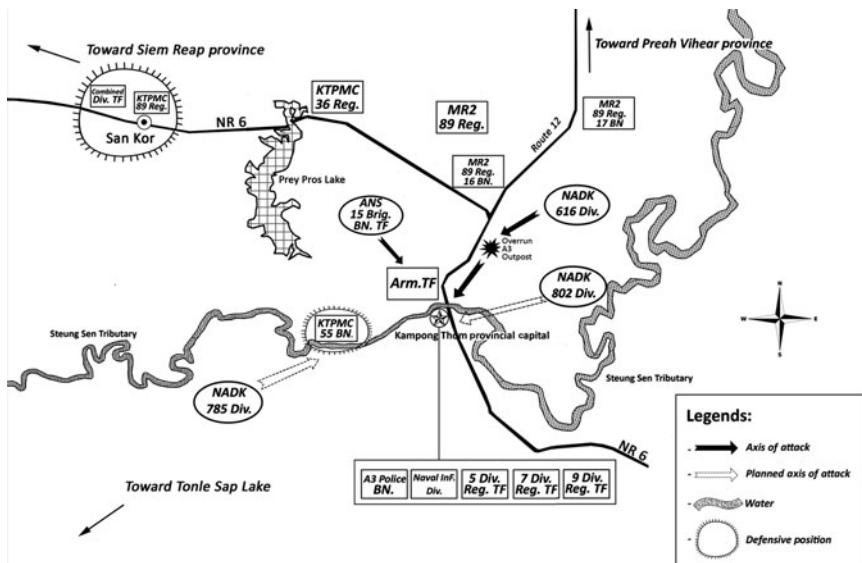
This collapse was so fast that even the Khmer Rouge was surprised that its first attack could inflict so much damage, so much so that they had not prepared any occupying force to follow up.<sup>112</sup> According to a former chief of staff of the Kampong Thom PMC, when the formation was routed, a local unit, the 30th Battalion, which was stationed north of Staung, rushed to the scene, but when it arrived at the district, it did not see anyone, neither the KPRA units nor the Khmer Rouge. The battalion commander then radioed his superior at the provincial capital, but no one believed him. His superior thought the battalion commander must have been captured by the Khmer Rouge, which had then forced him to relay false information to lure the KPRA into a trap.<sup>113</sup> The 30th Battalion was then ordered to withdraw to the provincial capital. Despite having a lot of soldiers in and around the provincial capital, however, no one beside the provincial battalions was in any condition to fight.

The fall of Staung was a bright victory for the CGDK, especially the Khmer Rouge. As the dust settled, hundreds of people from villages

controlled by the Khmer Rouge arrived at the Staung market and started sacking the PRK's rice warehouses.<sup>114</sup> The non-communist resistance also moved in to set up administration offices in the district.<sup>115</sup> As the author later recounted this story to one of the friends who was native to Kampong Thom province, this friend reminisced that he and his classmates actually took a high school exam during that time and the ANS and KPNLAF soldiers were proctoring the exam. When the KPRA recaptured the district later, the exam result was still upheld. One can only observe that "such is the nature of a civil war, for in the end, everyone is Khmer anyway." Some of the students, who took advantage of the confusion to adjust the exam results in their favor, actually got away with it.

But Staung was not the main prize. After the capture of the district, the Khmer Rouge did not rest, but continued their low intensity campaign to capture many villages on both sides of National Road 6 to open the way to the Kampong Thom provincial capital.<sup>116</sup> A large KPRA formation, albeit one with a questionable level of morale after its collapse at Staung, held defensive positions around a village called San Kor on National Road 6, approximately thirty-three kilometers northwest of the provincial capital. The NADK essentially avoided this strong point and continued to capture villages and hamlets on the fringes of the provincial capital. Even with reinforcement from the General Staff Headquarters and from MR2, the KPRA could only control the national road, and it arrayed its forces to protect National Road 6 and Route 12. On 13 June 1990, the NADK and elements of the non-communist resistance were poised to strike into the Kampong Thom provincial capital.<sup>117</sup> After losing so many villages and hamlets, the Kampong Thom PMC's intelligence system seemed paralyzed. In fact, the Khmer Rouge agents had already infiltrated the KPRA's communication unit in the provincial capital, a reality that was only discovered after the attack.<sup>118</sup>

Around this time, the KPRA dispatched an officer from the operations section of the General Staff Headquarters, as well as a deputy chief of general staff, both of whom had ample combat experience, to Kampong Thom province to stabilize the situation. When the deputy chief of general staff arrived, however, the province's party secretary had already prepared the counterattack. The former claimed that he was against the plan because the task force was too small; seventy soldiers and three amphibious, medium tanks, the Soviet-made PT-76.<sup>119</sup> The provincial party secretary argued that the party's intent was to swiftly recapture lost territory. The deputy chief of general staff then argued that while that was true, not enough troops were in any condition to carry out the counterattack. Moreover, two lightly armored platoons would stand no chance against a force that had routed a corps-size force. The attack would only result in giving away the tanks to the NADK. After a heated debate, the provincial party secretary yielded, and both agreed to strengthen the defense of the provincial capital before carrying out the counterattack. Considering what happened next, this proved to be a strategically wise decision.



Map 5.5 NADK attack on the Kampong Thom provincial capital. Despite the large number of KPRA units, most of them were not in any condition to fight due to panic suffered from losses earlier. The Kampong Thom PMC troops played a major role in the defense of the province.

Source: author.

On the night of 15 June 1990, three NADK divisions led the attack on the provincial capital. According to a former chief of staff of the Kampong Thom PMC, and based on interviews with former NADK soldiers, the three NADK units that participated in the operations were: the 802nd Division, the 616th Division and the elite transportation unit, the 785th Division.<sup>120</sup> The former two were indigenous to Kampong Thom while the third was a roving division that operated along the Tonle Sap Lake. Generally used as the transportation unit, the 785th Division also carried out special operations or assault on strong defensive positions if the situation demanded.<sup>121</sup> The only problem was that it was a roving division, thus having no connection to any particular province.

A few hours after midnight, the 616th Division infiltrated from the north, overrunning an “A3” combat police outpost. It then attacked into the provincial capital along National Road 6. The 802nd Division was supposed to attack from the east but, according to the former chief of staff of the Kampong Thom PMC, it radioed the 616th that it had already reached its objective in the provincial capital when in fact it had not.<sup>122</sup> He speculated that the 802nd Division was not as strong as the 616th, and the former had only previously attacked lightly defended positions or areas far away from

the urban centers. Perhaps the 802nd Division wanted to wait until the 616th had cleared out the KPRA main forces so that the 802nd would not have had to fight as hard as otherwise would have been necessary.

Believing what the commander of the 802nd Division had said, the 616th rushed into town. But it needed to cross a tributary where a bridge over which National Road 6 ran acted as a bottleneck for the attack (Figure 5.5). To make matters worse, less than a hundred meters from the bridge was a water tower that stood at about thirty meters high and on which the Kampong Thom PMC had put a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun and a 75 mm “DK-75” recoilless rifle gun. At the time that the NADK’s 616th Division tried to force its way into the provincial capital, a squad of the KPRA’s Kampong Thom PMC was manning the emplacement and mowed down the Khmer Rouge soldiers who tried to cross the bridge.<sup>123</sup>

Along the third axis, the 785th Division, which many considered an elite unit, was supposed to infiltrate the provincial capital using a route south of the Steung Sen tributary, which, had it done so, would have outflanked the water tower emplacement. But observing that the 616th was in trouble and that the 802nd did not seem to move, the 785th Division also decided to avoid this fight in order to preserve its forces. Moreover, the 55th Riverine



Figure 5.5 Steung Sen Bridge in 2016. The NADK 616th Division’s assault was stopped here, suppressed by the heavy machine gun and the recoilless rifle gun emplacements on top of the water tower (far side of the tributary bank), which can be seen in the center of the photo.

Source: author’s collection.

Battalion of the Kampong Thom PMC was maintaining defensive positions along the tributary at the time, which would have incurred heavy losses on the assault by the NADK's 785th Division.<sup>124</sup> By sunrise the next day, the Kampong Thom PMC had effectively disaggregated the NADK's 616th Division.

The non-communist resistance did not fare much better. It was unclear how strong a force they committed to the attack, but it appeared that a battalion-size combined force of the ANS' 15th Brigade and some elements of the KPNLAF's OMZ7 also participated in the attack.<sup>125</sup> While there was no joint command, the factions had somehow agreed to divide the area of operation. The ANS' battalion task force would attack parallel the axis of attack of the NADK's 616th Division, but the ANS and KPNLAF forces would attack from an avenue of approach west of National Road 6 (the east of which was used by the NADK's 616th Division). But this was a trick. It was very likely that the NADK had picked up intelligence that the KPRA's 15th Naval Infantry Division stationed its PT-76 tanks on the outskirts of the provincial capital and the NADK assigned the ANS' task force to that sector, saying it was a secondary effort, meaning the target should present only minimal resistance.<sup>126</sup> Having less local intelligence, the combined ANS-KPNLAF task force complied, believing its NADK friend had given it an easier task. The ANS and KPNLAF should have known better than to trust its communist friend.

According to the PRK's former party secretary of Kampong Thom, the Navy Directorate of the Ministry of Homeland Defense assigned ten PT-76 tanks to the 15th Naval Infantry Division and all ten were deployed at the provincial capital. These tanks did not see much action, so much so that most of their batteries were empty.<sup>127</sup> On the night of the attack, that proved to be beneficial to the KPRA. As most of the tanks were unable to move out, the KPRA decided to turn the tanks into emplacements and used them to defend against the assault of the ANS battalion task force which was then surprised to run into tanks. The assault was broken with considerable ease.

By daybreak on 16 June 1990, the CGDK assault in all sectors had been broken. Ultimately, Kampong Thom was always under threat, but when the Khmer Rouge attacked big targets, it failed as a conventional force. Unlike the forces in Battambang, which had benefited from the organization of Front 250 and 909, the Khmer Rouge divisions in this area had rarely worked together in large formation, which was typical of guerrilla units. Unlike in the provinces along the Cambodian-Thai border, the attack on the Kampong Thom provincial capital was badly coordinated.

The attack also demonstrated the strength of the KPRA's local forces. Had there been another attack on the retreating formation of the KPRA's regular forces, they could have always retreated either further to Siem Reap or to Kampong Cham. As a former officer of the Kampong Thom PMC noted, the forces that had been routed from the Staung district to San Kor village were ready for a second rout, and any explosive sound could have

potentially triggered their flight.<sup>128</sup> But the Kampong Thom provincial units had nowhere else to go, and so they had no choice but to stand and fight to protect their homes, just as the party officials in Banteay Meanchey had done. This was their home, hence this was their war. The regular forces became the supporting effort, and the PMC became the main effort.

One month after the successful defense of the Kampong Thom provincial capital, the KPRA assigned the 101st Regiment task force from the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC to an offensive operation that fully liberated Staung.<sup>129</sup> The task force breached the CGDK's regimental defenses and marched to meet the troops from Kampong Thom PMC who attacked from the southeast. The two units met each other in Staung on 15 July 1990. Propaganda posters, placards, office labels, and other official documents that the CGDK had installed in their new offices were dismantled, brought out onto the street, and ridiculed by the victorious KPRA soldiers.<sup>130</sup>

## 5.6 Diplomacy without an army

The non-communist resistance started the 1989 offensive with high hopes and determination. But after several bad tactical decisions, they saw the bulk of their forces disaggregated and territories lost. With the Khmer Rouge becoming the only remaining party to still have a force cohesive enough to fight as regular units, the non-communist resistance as well as the sponsoring countries began to fear a return of Pol Pot. In early June 1990, Prince Sihanouk met bilaterally with Premier Hun Sen of the PRK in Tokyo and struck a deal without the participation of the Khmer Rouge. The Prince and the Premier agreed to an eventual cease fire, a UN-sponsored election, and the establishment of a Supreme National Council (SNC).

The SNC was supposed to be a political body that would guarantee Cambodian sovereignty during the transition period. But the conflicting parties always disagreed as to the composition of the SNC. The PRK feared that an equal distribution among all four parties would see the CGDK capturing three-fourths of the positions.<sup>131</sup> The Tokyo summit made a breakthrough, giving the PRK and the CGDK an equal number of seats in the SNC.<sup>132</sup> One can only wonder if that concession was related to events on the battlefield. Backed by battlefield success, Premier Hun Sen got what he wanted.

The Japanese ministry of foreign affairs offered a rather simplistic reason for the absence of the other two parties—KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge—saying that it was difficult to contact them.<sup>133</sup> Ultimately, President Son Sann of the KPNLF did participate, but not the Khmer Rouge. Needless to say, the Khmer Rouge never agreed to the results of the summit. Against this backdrop, the NADK struck Staung in Kampong Thom, and it attacked the provincial capital days later. The failure of the offensive meant that the NADK's activities in Kampong Thom were further curtailed by the attrition of its 616th Division.

In late July and early August 1990, Mr. Son Sann, the president of the KPNLF, communicated with Premier Hun Sen of the PRK, calling for the cancellation of the results of the Tokyo summit and replacing it with a new meeting in Paris. This was the same behavior that we have seen in previous meetings. But this time, things were different. Fresh from victory in Kampong Thom, Premier Hun Sen of the PRK rejected the backsliding proposal.<sup>134</sup> Without an army, it seemed, one cannot impose one's terms in a negotiation. Subsequent negotiations continued to follow the result of the Tokyo summit. Thus, the PRK's overall success in Kampong Thom and Banteay Meanchey were crucial. As the KPNLF no longer had sufficient military capabilities to force any more concessions, it fell in line. The only remaining actor was the Khmer Rouge.

According to one source, it was near Malai, an isolated position along the Cambodian-Thai border which the KPRA's 6th Division had just abandoned, that Son Sen, a confidant of Pol Pot and who also held the position of NADK's chief of general staff, met with two representatives from the People's Republic of China on 18 August 1990.<sup>135</sup> At that meeting, Son Sen lauded the glorious achievements of the Khmer Rouge, including many victories over the KPRA.<sup>136</sup> Most of these cases, however, were simple, small-scale raids—not on the scale of Pailin. The realities on the ground did not escape the attention of the Chinese delegates. Also, unbeknown to the Khmer Rouge leaders, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council had already reached an agreement on the Cambodian conflict. The Chinese delegates politely listened to the presentation before stating their position:

You always told us you are winning, but this [office in the jungle] is what you always had since then. Soldiers are demoralized and they wanted freedom and free market [...] You simply can't use dictatorship for the second time [...] We do not intend to sell you out, but we want you to adhere to the non-violence principles and seek a political solution to the conflict, in accordance with the goodwill of the United Nations, the goodwill of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and the desire of the Cambodian people [...] The sponsors to the Cambodian civil war agreed to cease their support and negotiate for peace in 1991. The People's Republic of China must completely stop the support. Our visit here today brought this message. We think that if the peace negotiation succeeds in 1991, all Cambodian people will unprecedently rejoice. You should take this as priority.<sup>137</sup>

On 9 and 10 September 1990, all four parties to the Cambodian conflict met in Jakarta and agreed to a UN-sponsored election, with the SNC acting as the ruling body in the transition period.<sup>138</sup> The meeting occurred against the backdrop of PRK's battlefield success. In April 1990, the KPRA pushed through to capture Tmar Pouk after retaking Svay Chek. A former KPRA

officer of the Banteay Meanchey PMC noted that the order came from the top to time the operations precisely to strengthen Premier Hun Sen's bargaining positions at Jakarta.<sup>139</sup> Even though the KPRA did not stay in the district, it did show that it had the capability to launch the offensive and capture territory. In June the same year, the Khmer Rouge and the KPNLF also failed in the operations to control Kampong Thom province. The Khmer Rouge offensive in Battambang also stalled after their capture of Pailin. Fresh from battlefield success, Premier Hun Sen was in no mood to make any serious concessions that would endanger the PRK's positions.

Instead, as the dominant party on the battlefield, Premier Hun Sen's PRK extracted an important concession: the SNC was composed of twelve members, six of which came from the PRK, essentially a direct implementation of the result of the Tokyo summit.<sup>140</sup> Eventually, Prince Sihanouk and Premier Hun Sen became the co-chairs of the SNC, and its decisions would be based on the consensus principle. One should note that this was only an agreement "in principle" to accept the UN's role in the peaceful settlement of the Cambodian conflict, and no details whatsoever existed as to how to implement it. All four parties came to understand that there was not yet an explicit mention of a ceasefire. Thus, at least between that time and the time the details of the UN's role could be worked out, some land-grabbing operations would be possible. As the election became imminent, large territory and population control meant more votes. The question was who still had any military capabilities left to do so.

Towards the end of 1990, the CGDK operations in the entire country almost amounted to nothing. The KPNLAF and the ANS controlled several hamlets on the fringes of the northwestern provinces, although these were prizes that did not measure up to the sacrifices that had been made to control them. To make matters even worse, it was the Khmer Rouge that had seen comparatively more success, essentially tightening its grip on Pailin where it wasted no time in exploiting the gemstones. In 1991, the NADK remained the only military force that could threaten the survival of the PRK. But even then, their forces had been severely diminished during the failed attempt to capture Traeng. Despite some difficulties, it was the PRK that proved it had staying power. The PRK had just accomplished an astonishing great escape, and it entered the year 1991 with some payback in mind.

## Notes

- 1 Editorial staff, "Chronology of the Withdrawal of the Vietnamese Volunteer Army from Cambodia," *People's Army*, 27 September 1989.
- 2 Hugh de Santis and Robert A. Manning, *Gorbachev's Eurasian Strategy: The Danger of Success and Failure* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, August 1989), 17–18.
- 3 ហ៊ុន សែន [Hun, Sen], ៩០ ឆ្នាំ នៃជំនួយរោមពុជា [10 years of Cambodia's Journey], ភ្នំពេញ: ក្រសួងពេទ្យ នូវបាល់ទេស [Phnom Penh: unknown publisher, 1989], 172–175.

- 4 Leszek Buszynski, *Gorbachev and Southeast Asia* (Oxon, UK: Routledge Revivals, 1992), 180.
- 5 Editorial staff, “Sihanouk—Hun Sen Joint Declaration of the Meeting on 4 December 1987,” *People’s Army*, 9 December 1987.
- 6 Editorial staff, “The Soviet-China Summit,” *People’s Army*, 24 May 1989.
- 7 De Santis and Manning, *Gorbachev’s Eurasian Strategy*, 18.
- 8 Editorial staff, “Statement of His Excellency Ali Alatas Indonesian Foreign Minister and Chairman of the Informal Meeting in Jakarta,” *People’s Army*, 3 August 1988.
- 9 Buszynski, *Gorbachev and Southeast Asia*, 129.
- 10 ឃីស ស៊ែន [Hun, Sen], ពេទេរដនគក្រសំណញ់ ឆ្នាំ ១៩៩៩ [10 years of Cambodia’s Journey], 193–197.
- 11 Buszynski, *Gorbachev and Southeast Asia*, 180.
- 12 Ibid., 130.
- 13 Ibid., 130–131.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, 282.
- 16 Editorial staff, “Return of Comrade Premier of the Council of Ministers Hun Sen ‘Prince Sihanouk Marched One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward,’” *People’s Army*, 1 August 1989.
- 17 “Fix” is a military tactic in which an army does not necessarily try to destroy the enemy. Rather it tries to stop one element of the enemy from intervening to help other elements in the other area. This tactic is usually employed in a joint effort where another element of the enemy is being destroyed. Thus, the fixed enemy element will not be able to move to reinforce its other element that is being destroyed. If this “fix-and-mass” tactic is successful, then the target will be defeated in detail, one unit at a time.
- 18 It is important to note that by this time, the PRK started to make some cosmetic changes to the system. On 30 April 1989, the regime stopped calling itself the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, changing its name to the more neutral-sounding “State of Cambodia.” To simplify and to spare the readers yet another acronym, this book will still refer to the political leadership of the Phnom Penh government as “PRK” while referring to its military as the KPRA. The PRK did change the name of the military as well as instituting a formal rank system. Nevertheless, the soldiers still called themselves the KPRA and still did not really employ the new ranks that had just been bestowed. Perhaps, they were more interested in the reasons why they fought than the ancillaries.
- 19 The house was connected to a hero in Cambodian folklore who had lived in the town since the French colonial period.
- 20 វិទ្យាយោស់ចានបុរីភូតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីភូតិយោធក្រុមិកាត ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 44.
- 21 Ibid., 45.
- 22 វិទ្យាយោស់ចានបុរីភូតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], ពេទេរដនគក្រសំណញ់ ឆ្នាំ ១៩៩៩ [History of Pailin Provincial Military Command] (ព្រៃនណាបញ្ហា, កម្មណិត ៩៩៩៩ អគគុណយកដុំហិននយាយនិងកិច្ចការប្រទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២ [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012]), 12.
- 23 Ibid., 14.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 15.
- 26 វិទ្យាយោស់ចានបុរីភូតិសាស្ត្ររយាង [Institute of Military History], បុរីភូតិយោធក្រុមិកាត ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 49.

27 Rodney Tasker, “Another Year Zero? International Concern Focuses on Khmer Rouge Strength,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 November 1989.

28 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយោជាព ខេត្តបៀលិន [History of Pailin Provincial Military Command], 30.

29 *Ibid.*

30 NADK News Crew, 1989, *NADK Troops Captured Pailin*, Author’s collections, MPEG video, 43:35. The author obtained this archival video from a former officer of Bureau 5, Operations, of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters. The video was taken when the Khmer Rouge captured the town in 1989. In the video, the crews interviewed the Khmer Rouge soldiers on the scene about the weapons that they had seized and displayed those weapons. The officer who gave the author the video said that he retrieved the video cassette during the brief recapture of Pailin in 1994 when the new coalition government made up of forces from other former guerrilla factions tried to defeat the Khmer Rouge, which did not participate in the election.

31 Interview with a former officer of the KPRA 4th Division, Takeo, 12 July 2016.

32 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយោជាពក្នុងក្រុមការ ៥ [History of Military Region 5], 51.

33 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ៩៩ [History of the 11th Brigade], 31.

34 Interview with a former officer of the KPRA 4th Division, Takeo, 12 July 2016.

35 Rodney Tasker, “Another Year Zero?”

36 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ៥៩ [History of the 51st Brigade], 19.

37 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ៩៩ [History of the 11th Brigade], 33.

38 Interview with a former officer of the KPRA 4th Division, Takeo, 12 July 2016.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*

43 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ៩៩ [History of the 11th Brigade], 28.

44 Interview with a former officer of the KPRA 4th Division, Takeo, 12 July 2016.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*

47 Editorial staff, “News from the Battlefield,” *People’s Army*, 7 March 1990.

48 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ៩៩ [History of the 11th Brigade], 31.

49 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 310–315. Conboy tended to minimize the role of the ANS’ 2nd Division. The author’s research in the field, however, revealed that former KPNLAF fighters accepted that the ANS’ 2nd Division actually did their part.

50 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយោជាពក្នុងក្រុមការ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 26.

51 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 281.

52 *Ibid.*, 287.

53 *Ibid.*, 284.

54 វឌ្ឍយោស់ចំនួនប្រភពតិសាស្ត្រភយោជាព [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយោជាព ខេត្តបន្ទាយម៉ោងដីយោជាព [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 40.

55 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រភពតិសាស្ត្ររយាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាជក្រឹតាត ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 38.

56 Ibid., 39.

57 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 290.

58 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រភពតិសាស្ត្ររយាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាជ នគរបាលបន្ទុទាយមានជីយ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 42.

59 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 291.

60 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រភពតិសាស្ត្ររយាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកង់ណល់ខេត្ត ១ [History of the 51st Brigade], 22.

61 វិទ្យាសុចានប្រភពតិសាស្ត្ររយាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាជ នគរបាលបន្ទុទាយមានជីយ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 44.

62 Ibid., 45

63 Ibid.

64 The author was unable to identify the exact date for this event. Because it was not a success, the KPRA's *People's Army* newspaper did not mention anything and the Khmer Rouge's bi-monthly bulletin was pre-occupied with other events such as the capture of Pailin. The former officers interviewed by the author did not have any recollection of the date. It suffices to say here that the first attack happened less than a month from the second, and bigger attack.

65 Interview with a former KPRA commander of Phnom Srok district's military and his former chief of staff, Banteay Meanchey, 28 June 2016.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 This was the Socialist bloc's equivalent of the Western bloc's Claymore mine.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 The high number of prisoners was independently verified by another KPRA officer who had been serving in the Thmar Pouk district's military of Banteay Meanchey. Interview with former KPRA officer of the Thmar Pouk district's military, Banteay Meanchey, 18 August 2016.

75 Hun Sen "Lecture for Senior Military and Police Officers on the 'Win-Win Policy' That Terminated the Civil War in Cambodia," Kandal province, 23 July 2015. The author was a participant in the event.

76 Editorial staff, "News from the Battlefield," *People's Army*, 25 October 1989.

77 Interview with a former KPRA commander of Phnom Srok district's military and his former chief of staff, Banteay Meanchey, 28 June 2016.

78 Editorial staff, "Message Praising the Illustrious Victory of Our Comrades in Banteay Meanchey Province," *People's Army*, 1 November 1989.

79 KPRA's Army Television, 1989–1990, *Banteay Meanchey's Defense System*, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History, MPEG video, 1:55:27. The news also appeared in the *People's Army* newspaper, 1 November 1989, on page 7.

80 Editorial staff, "Activities of the Subordinate Units of the Siem Reap—Ouddar Meanchey PMC," *People's Army*, 1 November 1989.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 294.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 290–291.

86 Please note that this is only a speculation from a KPRA officer. It should be examined with caution. Nevertheless, this is, in the author's view, one of the most convincing explanations to date. See វិទ្យាសុចានបរិភពិសាស្ត្ររតយាទ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាទខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 54.

87 The KPNLAF actually claimed it controlled two thirds of the province at that time. See វិទ្យាសុចានបរិភពិសាស្ត្ររតយាទ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាទខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 49.

88 Ibid., 50.

89 Ibid., 51.

90 This account was independently confirmed by a former deputy chief of staff (whose testimony appears in the history of Battambang PMC discussing the reinforcements that were sent from Battambang to Banteay Meanchey), a former commander of the Banteay Meanchey PMC (in the official history of the Banteay Meanchey PMC), and a former regimental commander of the 179th Division (in the official history of the MR4).

91 KPRA's Army Television, 1989–1990, *Minister Tea Banh's Visit to the Battlefield in MR4 and MR5*, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History, MPEG video, 18:38.

92 វិទ្យាសុចានបរិភពិសាស្ត្ររតយាទ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាទ ខេត្តសៀមរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 30.

93 Interview with a former KPRA commander of Phnom Srok district's military and his former chief of staff, Banteay Meanchey, 28 June 2016.

94 Ibid.

95 វិទ្យាសុចានបរិភពិសាស្ត្ររតយាទ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាទ ខេត្តសៀមរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 33.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., 34.

98 Ibid.

99 វិទ្យាសុចានបរិភពិសាស្ត្ររតយាទ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកង់ណល់លេខ ៥៩ [History of the 51st Brigade], 25.

100 វិទ្យាសុចានបរិភពិសាស្ត្ររតយាទ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាទ ខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 71. The former chief of staff was later attached to MR5 whose headquarter is in Battambang.

101 KPRA's Army Television, 1990, *KPRA's Advance in Banteay Meanchey*, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History, MPEG video, 48:47.

102 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 289.

103 Crocker Chester et al., eds., *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), 302.

104 Ibid., 304–315.

105 Norodom Sihanouk, "Statement by Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia," *ANS Bulletin*, vol. 80, 15 June 1990. While the letter was published in the *ANS Bulletin* at the time the Kampong Thom provincial capital was attacked, it was a mere coincidence and was rather due to the time lag in the publication process at the time. Prince Sihanouk did send his letter to many newspapers, the most prominent of which was the Singaporean *Strait Times*, as soon as the letter was signed. What was ironic, however, was that the letter was published in the *ANS Bulletin* just next to a news item about the ANS success in Kampong Thom.

106 Ibid.

107 Moreover, the KPRA had already mobilized most of its reserve, especially MR2, to fight in MR4 and MR5 further west.

108 There was not sufficient information to determine the size of each task force. However, it was customary for the KPRA to assign either a battalion-size or regiment-size unit as a task force.

109 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោច ខេត្តកំពង់ចំ [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 12.

110 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោចរដ្ឋមន្ត្រាគារ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 49.

111 Ibid., 50.

112 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោច ខេត្តកំពង់ចំ [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 13.

113 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោចរដ្ឋមន្ត្រាគារ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 51.

114 Democratic Kampuchea, *NADK Bulletin*, vol. 30, August 1990, 10.

115 This was only discerned after the fact when the KPRA moved into the town a few months later. See KPRA's Army Television, 1990, *Staung Battlefield*, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History, MPEG video, 1:04:51.

116 Democratic Kampuchea, *NADK Bulletin*, vol. 30, August 1990, 12–13.

117 Ibid.

118 Conversation with a former battalion commander of the KPRA's 7th Division, Phnom Penh, 17 January 2012.

119 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោចរដ្ឋមន្ត្រាគារ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 52.

120 Ibid., 54.

121 Interview with a former chief of staff of the Siem Reap PMC, Siem Reap, 17 June 2012.

122 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោច ខេត្តកំពង់ចំ [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 21.

123 Ibid., 22.

124 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោចរដ្ឋមន្ត្រាគារ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 56.

125 Conversation with the former party secretary of Kampong Thom province, Beijing, 13 October 2016.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោច [Institute of Military History], បុរវត្តិយោច ខេត្តកំពង់ចំ [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 25.

129 KPRA's Army Television, 1990, *Staung Battlefield*, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History, MPEG video, 1:04:51.

130 Ibid.

131 Richard Sola, *Le Cambodge de Sihanouk: Espoir, Désillusions et Amertume, 1982–1993* (Paris: Sudestasie, 1994), 67.

132 SPK, "The Hun Sen-Sihanouk Tokyo Bilateral Negotiation Succeeded," *People's Army*, 6 June 1990.

133 Ibid.

134 SPK, "Interview of SPK with Comrade Premier Hun Sen," *People's Army*, 1 August 1990. The section also contained an open letter from Premier Hun Sen to Mr. Son Sann.

135 មេ មេត្ត [Mey, Mak], ការសិករជូនរដ្ឋិសាស្ត្ររាមិលបនិនសននិកាតនប៊ែលិន [Research into Guerrilla Warfare and Peace in Pailin] (សារណាគារអនុបណ្ឌិត សាកលវិទ្យាល័យចម្លោនពុបុច្ចោកវិទ្យាយោ ឆ្នាំ ២០០៥ [Cambodia: Master Thesis, Cambodian University of Polytechnics, 2005]), 11.

182 *When the sky falls and mountains are flattened*

136 Ibid., 13.

137 Ibid., 16.

138 Michael Vatikiotis, “Grudging Unity: Big Powers Force Factions Towards UN Settlement,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 September 1990.

139 Interview with former KPRA officer of the Thmar Pouk district’s military, Banteay Meanchey, 18 August 2016.

140 Editorial staff, “The SNC Cancelled the First Meeting Because the Other Party Had No Clear Position,” *People’s Army*, 19 September 1990.

## 6 Parting offensives

### Residual battles of the Cambodian civil war

#### 6.1 Counterargument: stealing the KPRA's thunder— Pailin and the return of the PAVN

Argument: In late 1989, after the loss of Pailin, one of the PAVN divisions that had previously served in Pailin returned to fight and decisively helped the PRK to survive.

Throughout the CGDK's offensive period in 1989, there were two major events that appeared to cause serious trouble for the KPRA. The first was the fall of Pailin in October 1989, and the second was the KPNLAF's push into Banteay Meanchey in the first stage (December 1989). After these two events, the CGDK's offensive stalled. Why? In 2013, using the official publication of the PAVN's unit history, Kenneth Conboy argued that the PAVN returned in 1989 and essentially destroyed the CGDK's armies and saved the PRK.<sup>1</sup> This argument is not entirely accurate, however, and this is where things become controversial.

According to a PAVN official unit history, elements of the 330th Division did return in October 1989 and stayed until December.<sup>2</sup> The unit's history specifically stated that the unit operated only in Battambang, but Conboy speculated, without substantiated proof, that the Vietnamese unit was also responsible for the defeat of the KPNLAF in Banteay Meanchey. While the PAVN unit's official history was quite open about the return, which was in defiance of the withdrawal agreement, it mentioned only that the PAVN had operated in Battambang, although no further details were provided, such as the size of the units deployed, the type of operations, or specific areas in which they had operated. Even when the history of the regiments and battalions is examined, only Battambang was mentioned.<sup>3</sup> Conboy's argument seemed to be skewed against the PRK. He extrapolated that the PAVN must have also intervened in Banteay Meanchey; otherwise how could the sudden collapse of the KPNLAF be explained? In the previous chapters, this book offered a competing account of what happened to the KPNLAF based on the KPRA's accounts of the battle.

During research for this book, the author raised this PAVN issue during interviews with former KPRA officers. Unfortunately, the result was inconclusive. The publications of the KPRA's unit history also failed to give

an accurate answer as to the return of the PAVN. Nevertheless, the research identified three archetypical descriptions as to the role of the PAVN returnees.

First, some officers did see the PAVN soldiers even after the supposed withdrawal in 1989. In Chapter 5, we examined an operation in the Phnom Srok district, Banteay Meanchey province. When asked about the PAVN's possible return, the chief of staff of the district's military recalled that one of his soldiers was seriously hit in the abdomen by an ANS recoilless round. He said it was a Vietnamese surgeon and two assistant surgeons who saved the life of his injured soldier.<sup>4</sup> But the soldier had to be sent to the nearby Preah Netr Preah district to be treated by the surgeons. In other words, it seemed that the PAVN did provide help, but only in the form of a handful of support troops.

Second, a former officer of the 4th Division noted that after the division was relocated to Traeng, he worked with Vietnamese soldiers who drove a truck for him.<sup>5</sup> But he did not have any lasting memories of the soldiers. In his account, while driving one day along a road laced with potholes resulting from exploded mines, the KPRA officer knew the pattern of the road and what potholes might contain new mines.<sup>6</sup> But the Vietnamese drivers refused to heed his advice. The truck hit a mine and the driver was killed; only the former officer of the 4th Division survived the ordeal. He also noted, just like other members of the KPRA, that the Vietnamese soldiers were paid by the KPRA, and they accepted "American dollars."<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that these Vietnamese soldiers left before the NADK offensive at Traeng in early 1990. It was the 4th Division and the 4th Division alone who stood against the NADK onslaught in early 1990.

The third account is probably the most important and was also quoted by Conboy. A former officer in the operations section of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters agreed that the PAVN had returned, but in the form of a handful of advisors (fewer than ten) and were only embedded within the mobile divisions.<sup>8</sup> Also, Battambang was not the only place the advisors had returned. Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Thom, and Ouddar Meanchey all received these advisors, and the advisors worked only with the mobile divisions in those provinces. What was puzzling was that these advisors were not entirely used for immediate combat operations. There were advisors for armor and artillery, as well as the newly acquired, multiple-rocket launcher system, the BM-21. Once again, the officer also noted that the Vietnamese troops were paid by the KPRA. These three archetypical accounts are anecdotal rather than systematic data. But that is the point: there was no uniform account that pointed to systematic PAVN deployment or its undisputed decisiveness.

Based on existing, publicly disclosed archives, and research on the events that occurred, this book offers three hypotheses as to the nature and effect of the return of the PAVN's 330th Division. First, in the "panic hypothesis," the role of the 330th Division was useful in the sense that it could help

shore up the morale of the KPRA soldiers. Perhaps after the collapse of the 196th Division at Pailin, the KPRA had actually panicked and called for reinforcements. But then they realized that most of the local units had successfully fought to defend the province to the point where they no longer needed such reinforcement. In other words, this situation was very similar to the Battle of Tannenberg in World War I when the German Eighth Army on the Eastern Front had fought and destroyed the far larger Russian armies, but not before the German high command panicked and diverted reinforcements from the much needed Western Front. Thus, the role of the 330th Division might not have been decisive because ultimately it was the KPRA, most notably the territorial units, who did most of the fighting. The morale-boosting effect was perhaps the only offering of the PAVN returnees.

Second, in the “overkill hypothesis,” the pertinent question is: what was the role of the 330th Division? Was it used to prevent the collapse of the PRK, or was it used to defeat the CGDK? If the 330th Division was used for defensive purposes, then this implies that Battambang was in danger of collapsing. But that conjecture was not supported by the evidence. While the 196th Division, 92nd and 95th Brigades were routed, Battambang still had the 4th and 6th Divisions, the 94th Brigade, the provincial battalions and support units of MR5. None of the latter were in any danger of failing. In addition, Battambang also sent task force reinforcements to shore up the defense of Banteay Meanchey. This means that Battambang must not have been in any danger of falling. Thus, we can reject the notion that the 330th Division was used to defend and prevent Battambang from collapse. It was overkill.

But then, in this “overkill hypothesis,” if the 330th Division was not used for defensive purposes, it must have been used for offensive purposes: the counterattack to recapture Pailin, or to defeat the CGDK in general. In this case, the 330th Division had failed in its mission because the Khmer Rouge had successfully fought to defend Pailin. In summary, the role of the 330th Division was either superfluous (if it was used defensively) or ineffective (if it was used offensively).

Third, in the “footprint and logistics hypothesis,” this book submits that any consideration of the role of the 330th Division must take into account the logistics and sustainment requirement of a modern division. Logistics is a very important issue but is usually ignored by many who do not understand the details of modern war. How big was the contingent that was deployed? All discussion up until this point assumes that the 330th Division was deployed in full force (i.e. around 10,000 personnel), otherwise, we return to the point where the PAVN contingent was too small to decisively affect any battlefield outcome. The 330th Division was a heavy division, which means it had heavy artillery and perhaps armor as well. To mobilize one division as large as the 330th would require significant logistics support, which, in turn, would expand the “footprint” of this division as well as the time needed for proper deployment. Ten of thousands of soldiers need

to eat, move, and fight, and the ammunition and fuel required for the operations must be sustained. On the other hand, if it was only a handful of advisors, logistics would not be a problem.

Moreover, the PAVN contingent that returned would have been required to do so by land, since they did not have any significant airlift capabilities. This meant a travel distance of more than five hundred kilometers from the Cambodian-Vietnamese border to the Cambodian-Thai border. They also had to use the national roads that had been severely damaged by the war as well as negotiating the Khmer Rouge ambushes. As the footprint (i.e. size) of the returning Vietnamese contingent became larger, so did logistics and sustainment operations. All of these required time, especially in the planning phase. By examining the official history of the 330th Division and its regiments, we can speculate three probable types of deployment: the division was not deployed in full force, it was deployed as regiment, or all units were primarily infantry units. In all of these cases, we can question if its impact was really decisive.

In addition to logistics, these units also needed artillery support in order to function effectively. On the conventional battlefield in 1989, the CGDK had already become a modern army with integrated artillery. The PAVN's experience notwithstanding, the infantry units of the 330th Division would not have been able to defeat the CGDK forces on their own. In this third hypothesis, the logistics and artillery support must have been provided by the KPRA. In other words, the 330th Division could not have independently decided the outcome of the battles. Conboy seems to have assumed that the PAVN was a superhuman army: a handful of PAVN units were able to stall an attack by the entire CGDK formation. This book rejects this assumption and instead emphasizes the role of the KPRA.

Ultimately, whether the KPRA's officers refused to admit the helping hand of the PAVN's 330th Division or if the PAVN exaggerated its contribution in 1989, we do not know for sure. Pending further research and without the disclosure of a detailed operational history of the 330th Division, perhaps we will never know the truth. However, based on the three hypotheses outlined here and based on the current state of the documentation and archives, this book proposes that the role of the 330th Division might not have been as decisive as Conboy had claimed. The return could have been an advantage for the KPRA, but the size of the unit seemed too small to have been able to decide the outcome of the campaign on its own. Perhaps, boosting the morale of the KPRA troops was a service of the 330th Division that we cannot deny. All things considered, the return of the 330th Division did steal the thunder from the KPRA's victory.

This chapter is aimed at providing another look at how the KPRA fought the war on its own despite the PAVN's direct combat support. Conboy, for example, seems to focus too much on the Battambang and Banteay Meanchey battlefields and based his judgment on whether it was the KPRA or the PAVN who defeated the CGDK, solely based on events in those two battlefields.

This current book wants to show that the KPRA fought in other important battlefields, containing and then routing the CGDK forces, paving the way for favorable political negotiation. This is not an attempt to denigrate or downplay the role of the PAVN in the PRK's survival. On the contrary, this book asserts that Vietnamese and Soviet assistance was instrumental in ensuring the PRK survival. What this book wants to emphasize, however, is that the PRK also did its part, fighting bloody battles in a chaotic battlefield to buy itself a decent victory. Accordingly, this chapter narrates the untold stories of major campaigns in the Cambodian civil war from mid-1990 to the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991.

## 6.2 Forgotten victories: the PRK's pre-emption and counteroffensive

Among the provinces potentially vulnerable to the CGDK's combined offensive, two provinces remained relatively dormant between 1989 and 1991. Because the operations in these provinces never reached brigade level (around 3,000 personnel), Pursat and Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey provinces did not figure in the analysis in the previous chapter. Consequently, an examination of the situation in these two provinces could shed some lights on the inability of the guerrillas to mass for large-scale offensive. In colloquial terminology, they fit the description of the proverbial "dogs that did not bark."

### 6.2.1 Pursat province

One of the dormant provinces during the 1989 CGDK combined offensive was Pursat. Located to the west of Tonle Sap Lake, Pursat was the mirror image of Kampong Thom. Kampong Thom was located to the rear of the battleground provinces, and Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey essentially shielded this province from the besieged Banteay Meanchey. Kampong Thom was badly hit nonetheless. Pursat, on the other hand, was relatively calm despite its geographical vulnerability.

Pursat was surrounded by three major guerrilla hot spots on its border. To the east was the Tonle Sap Lake, where the guerrillas were active due to sources of food in the Lake area, and to the north was the border with Battambang province, which was interdicted by the NADK's Front 909. To the west was the Cardamom Mountain range, which was perhaps the most complicated geography in the province. The majority of the population in the province lived along National Road 5, which ran parallel to the Tonle Sap Lake, but the road westward, in the direction of the Cambodian-Thai border and the Cardamom Mountain, was almost non-existent. The best way to move around was via creeks and tributaries running down from the Cardamom Mountain, making them very vulnerable to flash floods during rainy seasons. Throughout most of the war, the PRK's influence scarcely extended to this area.

While Phnom Penh was liberated on 7 January 1979, a date considered to be the national liberation day, the PRK, in fact, still did not control the entirety of Pursat and had to continue fighting for the best part of that year to secure NR5. Perhaps because of this complex environment, only a week after the national liberation, Pursat had already established one battalion, the 1st Battalion, created from three hastily assembled district companies. In May 1979, the 2nd Battalion was established. In other words, the Pursat battalions were created before the dual-duty companies due to its vulnerabilities.<sup>9</sup>

The armed propaganda units arrived in Pursat belatedly on 25 November 1980. They were later augmented to create seven dual-duty companies, distributed in five districts including the provincial capital. The militias were created later that year. In 1981, the 2nd Battalion was deployed to defend the Cambodian-Thai border, and the 37th Battalion was created to replace it. The province later established four more battalions: the 7th Battalion (1987), the 5th Battalion (1988), the 6th Battalion (1989), and 3rd Battalion (1990). In 1990, the province had built a regiment, the 89th Regiment.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, the history of the Pursat PMC did not mention any large-scale operations from the beginning of the CGDK's combined offensive until the time the Paris Peace Agreements were signed in 1991. This fact was puzzling, considering the nature of the province. It would have been easier for the Khmer Rouge to seize Pursat's urban centers than those of Kampong Thom. Yet, they attacked Kampong Thom instead. This relative calm in Pursat was also puzzling because Battambang to the north was badly hit and yet the chaos did not spill into Pursat.

In 2013, the author had a chance to interview a former commander of the Pursat PMC as part of the Institute of Military History's oral history project. The biography was later published in the official unit history of the Pursat PMC.<sup>11</sup> A brief study of his biography could help explain why Pursat could remain dormant during the offensive. In the 1960s, "Mr. B" finished his pedagogical training and became a schoolteacher but was later forced by events to serve in the military in 1979 as a soldier of the 1st Battalion. After having commanded several units and because of his relatively high educational level—the Khmer Rouge had decimated the intellectual population—he was appointed as the chief of staff of the Pursat PMC in 1981. As a former mathematics teacher, he found little difficulty with the number crunching associated with headquarters staff duties, especially logistics. His planning skill was quite useful in the planning of the operations in the province. In the Cambodian civil war, the operational tempo followed seasonal cycles. The KPRA often intensified the attack during the dry season (November to April) when it could bring superior firepower and mechanized force to bear. The dry season was also the time for bringing supplies to the isolated units. During the rainy season (May to October), however, daily downpours restricted the KPRA's movements, allowing the Khmer Rouge to intensify the attack.

He observed that the Khmer Rouge normally massed their combat power by mobilizing troops from many villages before launching major operations on strategically significant objectives. However, even before such operations could be launched, the Khmer Rouge also had to marshal their logistics to distribute ammunition and other supplies to pre-positioned caches along their lines of operations. The former chief of staff of Pursat PMC had determined that the best time to attack, therefore, was just before the end of the dry season until the very early weeks of the rainy season. During that time, the Khmer Rouge's logistics stock had not yet reached critical level, and therefore they would not be able to maintain any strong defense nor were they able to attack.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, he always planned a series of preemptive attacks on the Khmer Rouge's key logistics nodes, thus disaggregating their logistics early on, and then sustained a series of smaller efforts throughout the rainy season. He also planned for similar operations just before the start of the dry season. Even though these operations could not totally eliminate the Khmer Rouge's forces, they probably did enough to disrupt the Khmer Rouge's preparations and prevented them from launching major operations as a conventional army.

The former PMC chief of staff claimed that the largest stocks of ammunition, several medium-sized artillery pieces, recoilless rifles, mortars, various types of mines, and even several armored personnel carriers were seized in an operation at the beginning of the rainy season in 1989 (i.e. mid-September).<sup>13</sup> Apparently, the Khmer Rouge's logistics units had not yet prepared any strong defenses around their staging base, and when the Pursat forces attacked, the Khmer Rouge hastily abandoned the ammunitions that they had just transported from the border. The former chief of staff of the Pursat PMC did not remember the exact amount, but he remembered that the ammunitions filled up the spaces at the four-story tall building of the PMC headquarters. The irony of this episode was that soon afterwards, as the Khmer Rouge forces began their attack on Pailin, some of the supplies that the Pursat PMC had seized were also sent to support the KPRA's operations in Pailin.<sup>14</sup>

A few months later, in 1990, he was promoted from the chief of staff to the position of commander of the Pursat PMC. The former PMC commander pointed to another contribution of the Pursat PMC: protecting the lines of communications. As the Khmer Rouge pounded Pailin in late 1989, Pursat was relatively calm. But elements of Front 909 did try to operate along the border between Battambang and Pursat provinces and constantly harassed the lines of communication, even destroying bridges, along National Road 5. A customary guerrilla tactic, attacking along the border of two government units benefits the guerrillas in the sense that the government units usually find it difficult to coordinate their actions.

For unknown reasons, one major bridge across a river, on which National Road 5 ran, sat right at the border of Battambang and Pursat. Battambang

was initially in charge of protecting the bridge. But as the province was threatened by major Khmer Rouge forces along the Cambodian-Thai border, the bridge was repeatedly destroyed, and the militias were unable to protect it. Around 1989, Battambang transferred de facto control of the bridge to Pursat, and the latter was able to protect the bridge during the crucial period of the CGDK's offensive.

The former PMC commander proudly pointed to the map depicting the border between Battambang and Pursat, which ran like a zigzag line, something that was common for almost any map. But at one point, called the "Svay Don Keo bridge" (named after a district of Battambang, to which the bridge once belonged), the line became straight, as if to carve out the bridge for Pursat before continuing to assume its zigzag pattern. Even today, the extremely short straight line delineating the bridge for Pursat is still visible on the map. In 1994, one year after the UN-sponsored election, the former PMC commander was promoted to deputy commander of MR5. When the war ended in 1999, "Mr. B" was promoted to general officership and assumed the most important position in MR5. Perhaps his career progression does tell us something about how well he fought and why the NADK, especially Front 909, could not attack Pursat in large formation.

### *6.2.2 Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey provincial military command*

Siem Reap is a historic province. It is the site of the famous Angkor Wat temple, a temple that always appeared on Cambodian flags of all political regimes. Even with diverse ideologies, if there is one thing that all Cambodians of all political stripes could agree on and would unite around, that is Angkor Wat temple. Siem is the Khmer word for Siam while "Reap" means "flatten": the name means a place where the Siamese troops were flattened, a living legacy of the history of violence between Cambodia and Thailand. Many former veterans of the Siem Reap PMC always attributed their success to this tradition of their province.

Before 1991, the province was known as Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey, the latter name being a poetic Khmer term meaning "victorious north." It bordered the Tonle Sap Lake to the west, Banteay Meanchey to the northwest, Preah Vihear province to the east, and Kampong Thom to the southeast. Its northern boundary extended to the Cambodian-Thai border, which ran along the Dangrek mountain range. But halfway north, the province was divided laterally from east to west by the Kulen Mountain. The road to the north had to pass through this area, which was highly contested. As a result, the Siem Reap provincial capital could benefit from this geographic buffer, while two highly populated districts, Samraong and Chong Kal, were isolated north of this buffer. Perhaps because of this relative security, the PAVN put the field headquarters of the PAVN's Front 479 in front of Angkor Wat temple, less than five kilometers from the provincial capital.

In the Ouddar Meanchey part of the province, the Samraong district's military command acted almost like an independent PMC due to the difficulties in maintaining contact with the Siem Reap provincial capital. On the Kulen Mountain that divided this region from the provincial capital, the KPRA could control only four villages, while the Khmer Rouge controlled the other four.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the Khmer Rouge constantly harassed the movement on the road along the mountain pass. The 286th Division stationed in Ouddar Meanchey with the aim of stopping infiltration into the interior. It was one of the KPRA's finest units and had substantial armored capabilities compared to other units due to the flat terrain between Dangrek Mountain range and Kulen Mountain which this unit occupied.

The organization of the district's military command was not different from other provinces, where the armed propaganda units transformed themselves into dual-duty units, then into battalions and regiments. In 1986, the total number of soldiers in the province stood at 5,924 men.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the headquarters and support unit troops, the province had seven battalions. In 1989, the total number of troops tripled, reaching a total of 15,078, excluding militia troops. The number of districts increased to fourteen with the smallest district having at least two companies. The battalions increased to eight and were reorganized and renamed. In that year, the province had organized four regiments: 45th, 101st, 167th Regiment, and a border regiment. In addition, the militias consisted of 3,087 self-defense militias (fixed outposts in key areas) and 5,389 hamlet and village militias, totaling 8,476 people.<sup>17</sup>

Siem Reap's geographic advantage and the fact that it was the headquarters of Region 4 (the KPRA's immediate successor to the PAVN's Front 479) were perhaps what explained the high number of troops. Because Siem Reap's threat was not proportionate to the large number of troops, the PMC organized a task force the size of a regiment to be used as reserve and reaction forces to help other provinces. Most of the time, the 101st Regiment was in charge of this mission, but in some cases, a headquarters unit was augmented as an ad hoc task force. To confuse the enemy, the headquarters' task force regiment was designated a division, and its name was changed constantly. Towards 1989, the task force would see operations in Preah Vihear, Banteay Meanchey, and Kampong Thom—essentially all the provinces around it.

### 6.2.3 *The 286th Division*

The 286th Division was deployed in a favorable position. Its area of responsibility had relatively less vegetation than other places, and the relatively flat terrain allowed the division to quickly dispatch its armored force to intervene in any place that was threatened by the guerrillas. Moreover, the area had only a few water sources, all of which were controlled by the division. As a result, the ANS divisions responsible for operations in

this area made little headway. The Khmer Rouge did not fare better. Nevertheless, due to their population network in the villages, the latter could operate in the interior and threatened many districts. Because the CGDK could never mass one brigade (KPRA's standard) to attack, this province was precluded from the analysis in the previous section. From 1989 to 1991, the Khmer Rouge could sporadically attack some districts to force the Siem Reap task force regiment to return to Siem Reap, thus relieving the pressure on the Khmer Rouge's units in other provinces. Premier Hun Sen grasped the situation very well. According to an account by a former commander of the 286th Division, in 1988, Premier Hun Sen issued an order:

Comrade! Soon, the negotiation process will start. Samraong district (Siem Reap—Ouddar Meanchey province) was very vulnerable and the CGDK might try to capture it to shore up their bargaining power. I want you to protect the district at all cost.

To which, the former commander of the 286th Division replied, "Yes Comrade Premier! We pledge to defend the district to the last man."<sup>18</sup>

Only a few cases of guerrilla operations in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey were notable between 1989 and 1991. There were three notable military events in the province. The first event was guerrilla in nature. Since 1981, the Khmer Rouge was able to launch what we may call "humiliation attacks," which were brief attacks on the headquarters of the PMC and the military region. The attacks typically started around midnight and then ended the same night.

The second notable event was the direct legacy of the PAVN's flawed strategy. Just as the Vietnamese units withdrew, the KPRA's conventional units were pushed to the Cambodian-Thai border to replace the Vietnamese units. In Siem Reap, the 286th Division could not do that due to the importance of Samraong district. True to its strategy, however, MR4 pushed one single regiment, the 41st Regiment, to protect the remote town of Anlong Veng. This regiment was completely isolated and, predictably, it collapsed at the first Khmer Rouge attack in 1989 and abandoned most of its equipment.<sup>19</sup> Its sibling unit, the 42nd Regiment, had more successes in Banteay Meanchey, more specifically Phnom Srok district.

A third notable event was the collapse of some of the regiments of the 286th Division. In fact, the ANS and the Khmer Rouge could never do to the 286th Division what they had done to the 196th Division. The CGDK units operating in this area included: ANS 2nd Division, ANS 3rd Division, KPNLAF's OMZ5, the NADK's 519th and 912th Divisions.<sup>20</sup> As a side note, it was this OMZ5 and the ANS divisions that had moved west to attack Phnom Srok in 1989, only to be trapped by the KPRA 42nd Regiment and the task force of the 286th Division, mostly its 5th Regiment. In an attempt to move back to its haven in Ouddar Meanchey, the remnants of OMZ5 ran into the militia's defensive positions and was put out of action.

Then the ANS tried what the Chinese military philosopher, Sun Tzu, called “indirect method,” i.e. winning without using frontal attack. As soon as the CGDK started its offensive in 1989, Ouddar Meancheay region was relatively calm, and the 286th Division performed well. One regiment, in particular, the 7th Regiment that operated in the western part of the province, directly on the border with Banteay Meancheay, had continuously pushed forward. As a result, a reinforcement battalion from Prey Veng was given to this regiment to sustain its success. The 5th Regiment had also been quite successful in the operations in Banteay Meancheay.

But not all regiments were successful. The division had found out that the 6th Regiment to the north of the province seemed to have some irregularities with its handling of the logistics. It turned out that the regimental commander had already defected to the ANS and had deserted his house when the divisional inspector arrived. Later that night, the former regimental commander led an ANS task force to attack the regimental headquarter. A quick intervention of the armored force of the 286th Division narrowly prevented disaster.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, the 7th Regiment began to push too far. For unexplained reasons, this regiment was extremely successful, pushing forward with little resistance from the ANS. Then, also for unexplained reasons, the regiment lost all of its positions almost overnight. To make matters worse, several tanks, armored personnel carriers, as well as some medium and heavy artillery pieces were lost to the ANS. As quickly as it advanced, the 7th Regiment fell back. In early 1990, the division found out that the regimental commander had actually defected to the ANS, and the early easy successes were just a ploy to get the 286th Division to assign more precious armored units to the regiment so that the ANS could capture them later. The ploy worked. The greatest irony from this episode was that a former KPRA officer claimed that the former commander of the 7th Regiment was actually considered for the highest decoration, the “Hero Award,” before his ploy was uncovered.<sup>22</sup> After these two setbacks, the 286th Division retreated and consolidated its grip around Samraong and Chong Kal districts in 1990. The front then stabilized afterwards.

### **6.3 Operation X-91 and Kampot Operation: the KPRA on a rampage**

By Cambodian standards, Operation X-91 was the largest military campaign since 1985. The X-91 campaign centered in Kampong Thom and it aimed to clear all enemy forces along the Tonle Sap Lake as well as Route 12 to Preah Vihear province. Meanwhile, the Siem Reap PMC and MR4 also launched operations along the border with Preah Vihear and Kampong Thom.

In Operation X-91, the KPRA used several units that, hitherto, had not been committed to serious combat. The most prominent of those units was

the Navy Directorate of the Ministry of Homeland Defense. The Navy's task of protecting Cambodian maritime territory seemed easier than the austere life of the army divisions who operated along the Cambodian-Thai border. But the Navy Directorate also had two other tasks besides its mission on the high seas: coastal defense and riverine patrol. Both of these forces required amphibious naval infantry who could also operate on land. Towards 1989, the Navy Directorate organized a brigade-size task force of amphibious, naval infantry that was ready to respond to any contingency. The task force was a mechanized unit, equipped with the distinctive PT-76 amphibious medium tank instead of the standard T-54 main battle tank of the army divisions.

The first major combat of the naval infantry division (the task force was called a division even though it had less personnel than a normal division) was in 1990 in Kampong Thom province. With the Tonle Sap Lake to the west and tributaries zigzagging across the province, the task force's PT-76 tanks were used with remarkable effectiveness. The naval infantry task force was involved in all operations in Kampong Thom province to include the Staung debacle and the defense of the provincial capital. Its major mark, however, was in Operation X-91.

On 17 January 1991, in the Middle East, the US-led international coalition launched ground operations to push the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. On that very same day, the KPRA launched Operation X-91, the largest offensive operation since the PAVN's 16-Camps Campaign in 1984 and 1985. Its intent was to recapture as much territory as possible before the political settlement took place. Operation X-91 was a complicated, multi-layered, multi-stage, combined arms operation.

On the "highest point" (or D-Day in KPRA's parlance), a task force advanced from Staung district to the northeast. It consisted of a transportation unit manned by two hundred and twenty-five militiamen of Staung district, two battalions of the Kampong Thom PMC, one regiment of the Prey Veng PMC, one battalion of the Preah Vihear PMC, one battalion of the Siem Reap PMC, and a task force from the newly established 7th Division (headquartered in Kampong Chhnang province).<sup>23</sup> These units converged to envelope the Daung hamlet, thought to be the headquarters of the ANS 15th Brigade.

On 18 and 19 January, a regiment task force of the 5th Division (headquarters in Preah Vihear province) and a battalion of the Kampong Thom PMC pushed to recapture Prasat Balaing district northeast of the provincial capital which the ANS had captured six months earlier. During this operation, the KPRA discovered a makeshift path constructed by the CGDK to channel their forces and transport ammunitions into the interior. The KPRA task force found a large ammunition depot that had been stockpiled by the ANS 15th Brigade. Then, the Siem Reap PMC troops found a trail constructed by the Khmer Rouge that ran from the Cambodian-Thai border across Siem Reap, to the border of Kampong Thom and Preah

Vihear and continued to Steung Treng. This new development prompted the commander of Operation X-91 to issue a new order to MR4 to establish a field headquarters at Chikreng district in Siem Reap province to oversee a spinoff operation dubbed "X-2391," which was set to start on 23 January 1991, hence the name 2391.<sup>24</sup>

Back in Kampong Thom, the Siem Reap PMC had interdicted a CGDK supply column consisting of forty-two ox carts. In the next two days, two battalions of the Kampong Thom PMC continued to push northwest along National Road 6 to try to reach the headquarters of the ANS 15th Brigade. On midnight of 26 January, two mechanized battalions of the 15th Naval Infantry Division started to advance northeast of Staung district to meet with the task force of the 7th Division. Both units met three days later and jointly attacked the headquarters of the ANS 15th Brigade. Based on the after-action report, published in the *People's Army* newspaper, the headquarters had apparently been evacuated before the KPRA attack.<sup>25</sup>

As before, whenever the KPRA or the PAVN attacked in force, the CGDK generally declined combat. But if the attack was aimed at the camps or, in the case of X-91, the ammunitions dump, the CGDK was pushed into an awkward position. The CGDK typically put up stiff resistance, until it realized that the defense would not be successful without heavy cost. In such cases, the CGDK defended strongly in the beginning and then yielded if the attack continued. This was the case during Operation X-91.

In the aftermath of the operation, the *People's Army* newspaper reported that the CGDK units consisted of the NADK 616th Division, the ANS 15th Brigade, and a task force from the KPNLAF OMZ5.<sup>26</sup> In total, the newspaper reported that the NADK and the ANS suffered around 223 casualties, and the KPRA captured 2,226 prisoners, also seizing 1,292 weapons. Furthermore, 116 men defected and 58 surrendered in combat. Most of the casualties and losses occurred within the first five days of the operation. The *People's Army* reported that after 22 January, encounters between the KPRA and the CGDK became less frequent and less intense.<sup>27</sup>

In all, Operation X-91 success was threefold. First, the PRK demonstrated that it had staying power. The CGDK units were severely attrited since the beginning of their combined offensive. The units in Kampong Thom tried their luck and failed. The best unit that was indigenous to Kampong Thom, the NADK 616th Division suffered heavy casualties and lost most of its veterans. The *People's Army* newspaper claimed the KPRA had inflicted a 50 percent attrition rate on the NADK division.<sup>28</sup>

Second, the KPRA seized six ammunitions dumps in Kampong Thom province in the aftermath of Operation X-91 as well as a major one along the border between Kampong Thom and Siem Reap province. Of the six ammunitions dumps that the KPRA had seized in Kampong Thom, four were in the vicinity of Staung district. With such a large amount of ammunition on their hands, the CGDK could easily attack Staung from all directions. It was thus not surprising that the district had always been threatened by the

CGDK. One of the ammunitions dumps discovered on 12 February 1991 housed 1,110 RPG rockets of all variants, 831 rifle-launched grenades, 275 boxes of TNT and 280 mines.<sup>29</sup> The *People's Army* newspaper reported that the ammunitions dump belonged to the NADK 616th Division. By examining the inventory, it seemed that the site had indeed belonged to the NADK since the ammunitions types matched the hallmarks of the Khmer Rouge tactic: shock by overwhelming firepower.

Such raids meant that the CGDK would need to spend much more precious time transporting and stockpiling the ammunitions again before they could launch any significant offensive. But in 1991, time was a luxury the CGDK did not have. With diplomatic talks in full stride, and the sponsoring countries getting tired of the war in Cambodia, the CGDK had to find an opportunity to launch a fresh offensive to convince its sponsors that victory was in sight. This directly relates to the third point.

The third effect of Operation X-91 was aggravating the frictions between the CGDK factions. For everyone to include many foreign sponsors of the resistance (but with the exception of the Khmer Rouge), any fresh offensive from the CGDK could only be launched by the Khmer Rouge. The possibility of the Khmer Rouge becoming the only able military body of the CGDK to fight against the KPRA was a nightmare in the process of becoming a reality. Once again, this did not sit well with Prince Sihanouk. This book submits that the situation on the battlefield at the conclusion of Operation X-91, and not superstition (see Chapter 1), was the main reason why Prince Sihanouk was accommodative to the PRK's demands. Finally, everyone who still doubted the Khmer Rouge resurgence after repeated defeats in the western province and Kampong Thom was gravely disillusioned when the NADK launched a daring operation deep in the southwest of Cambodia.

Kampot, a coastal province in the Khmer Rouge's Battle Zone 3, was a residual zone with the lowest priority. The reason for such little attention was the difficulty that the Khmer Rouge had in supplying it and the tremendous efforts it required to amass enough ammunitions to launch a significant offensive. One can only experience the beauty (or rather the destructive effects) of modern combat if and only if there is enough ammunition to sustain the fight. While Kampot was in Battle Zone 3, the NADK units that operated in the area could draw some advantage from mountains and jungles that covered a large part of the province. One of those areas was a mountain range called Phnom Voal (literally translated as Vine Mountain), where the thick jungle could prevent an assault by the KPRA. The geography around Phnom Voal was troubling for the KPRA. Three major districts of Kampot province were laid at the foot of the mountain and National Road 3 was located to the east of the mountain.

Consequently, Kampot found itself in almost the same situation as Siem Reap province because the NADK could easily walk down from the mountain to either infiltrate the districts or attack the provincial capital, which it did on several occasions. Perhaps as a response to the KPRA's Operation

X-91 and to retake the initiative, the NADK intensified its actions in Kampot. One week before the conclusion of Operation X-91 in Kampong Thom, the NADK unit in Kampot, the 405th Division, launched its offensive, raiding Kampong Trach district on 9 February 1991.<sup>30</sup> Afterwards, they expanded their control to the surrounding districts and even planned to raid the Kampot provincial capital.

In March 1991, just as Operation X-91 concluded, the KPRA pulled most of its forces from Kampong Thom to reinforce Kampot. The operation called for an envelopment of the Khmer Rouge forces and pushed them back to Phnom Voal. The Navy Directorate led the operation with its 15th Naval Infantry Division as well as calling indirect fire from its patrol boat on the coast.<sup>31</sup> A task force of the 7th Division and the cadets battalion, both veterans of Operation X-91, participated in the operation. But the territorial force remained the main contributor of forces to the operation. MR3 allocated the 98th Regiment (two battalions), one reconnaissance company, one A3 Combat Police Battalion, one battalion from the Takeo PMC and three battalions from its home unit, the Kampot PMC.<sup>32</sup>

The task force was a combined arms formation. The 15th Naval Infantry Division was equipped with the now familiar PT-76 medium amphibious tank. The KPRA General Staff Headquarters also allocated a battery of the BM-21 multiple rocket launchers as well as employing the newly acquired MiG21 to pummel the NADK's positions in the mountain.<sup>33</sup> The operation started on 18 March 1991 with a land, naval, and aerial bombardment of the Khmer Rouge bases in the mountain. To divert the attention of the task force, the NADK planned for a direct attack on the provincial capital to draw away some elements of the KPRA's task force that were attacking Phnom Voal. But the plan was leaked to the KPRA through the local people's intelligence network and the NADK failed to gain anything from the raid on the provincial capital.<sup>34</sup>

Outnumbered and outgunned, the Khmer Rouge refused battle and once again returned to the hit-and-run guerrilla tactics. The KPRA also called off the inconclusive Kampot operation on 13 April 1991 just as the traditional Khmer New Year festival was approaching.<sup>35</sup> The PRK eventually re-asserted control over all of the districts in Kampot province. While the KPRA mobilized a large task force to the province, only to have played the hide-and-seek game with the Khmer Rouge guerrillas, the PRK did make a strong statement, namely that any CGDK offensive would be responded to with full force.

## **6.4 Peace!**

By April 1991, it became increasingly clear that the CGDK could not launch any additional significant offensive to shake off the status quo. Any attempt to the contrary would become a gamble and would only increase the disparity between them and the PRK. On 23 October 1991, details

regarding the UN's supervision of the election in Cambodia were hammered out in the meeting in Paris, known as the Paris Peace Agreements. The agreements dictated that all four parties were to cease hostilities immediately. That was the time all fighting truly ceased. On 10 November 1991, the soldiers of the United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) arrived in Cambodia. On 14 November, Prince Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh for the first time since 1979. The Prince then travelled with Premier Hun Sen in an open-roofed sedan to the newly refurbished Royal Palace, passing major roads where many people, including the author, spontaneously came out to greet the return of the Prince. In February 1992, the UNAMIC became the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), and it started preparing for the first election in Cambodia in decades. The four parties to the conflict were expected to demobilize 70 percent of their military forces and prepare to participate in the election. Finally, peace could prevail, at least for a time.

## Notes

- 1 Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 297–298.
- 2 Tran Ba Diem, ed., *Lịch sử Sư đoàn bộ binh 330, Quân khu 9* [History of the 330th Infantry Division, Military Region 9] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 2004 [Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam: People's Army Publishing House, 2004]), 237–238.
- 3 Đảng ủy—Ban Chỉ huy Trung đoàn 3 [Party Committee—Committee for the 3rd Regiment], *Lịch sử Tiểu đoàn 7, Trung đoàn 3, Sư đoàn bộ binh 330, Quân khu 9 (1958–2008)—Đơn vị ba lần Anh hùng lực lượng vũ trang nhân dân* [History of the 7th Battalion, 3rd Regiment, 330th Infantry Division, Military Region 9 (1958–2008)—Three Times Heroes of the People's Army] (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia—Sự Thật, 2011 [Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam: National Political Publishing House—Truth Publishing House, 2011]), 156.
- 4 Interview with a former KPRA commander of Phnom Srok district's military and his former chief of staff, Banteay Meanchey, 28 June 2016.
- 5 Interview with a former officer of the KPRA 4th division, Takeo, 12 July 2016.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Conversation with a former officer of the operations section of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters, Phnom Penh, 13 March 2013.
- 9 វិទ្យាល័យប្រចាំខែត្រួតសាស្ត្រយោប៊ា [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកិច្ចយោប៊ា ខេត្តព្រះសារ [History of Pursat Provincial Military Command] (ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាន នយោបាយនគរបាលរោគសេរ, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ភ្នំពេញ ២០១២) [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012]), 3.
- 10 Ibid., 5.
- 11 Ibid., 6.
- 12 Ibid., 13.
- 13 There is no alternative source to evaluate this claim. However, given the fact that the CGDK could not mount large-scale attack in the province perhaps lent some credence to this claim, given the current state of the documentation. The issue will be discussed further in the last chapter. That said, the author was able

to find several photographs at the Ministry of Information that independently verified the claim of the former PMC commander. The photographs depict convoys of canoes the KPRA used to transport seized ammunitions from the jungle to the provincial capital. The ammunitions were predominantly RPG rounds, which corresponds to what the NADK would have used in the offensive. Readers who are interested can contact the author or the Ministry of Information for the photographs.

- 14 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាជ ខេត្តព្រៃត [History of Pursat Provincial Military Command], 15.
- 15 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាជ ខេត្តសៀមរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 32.
- 16 Ibid., 68.
- 17 Ibid., 70.
- 18 Interview with a former commander of the 286th Division, Phnom Penh, 4 January 2012.
- 19 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ២ [History of the 2nd Infantry Division], 24.
- 20 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិយាជក្រុមការ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 71. The official history of the Siem Reap PMC essentially contains the same data.
- 21 វិទ្យាសុច្ចានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររាជ [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកងទលលេខ ២ [History of the 2nd Infantry Division], 25.
- 22 Ibid., 28.
- 23 The story of Operation X-91, “Chronicles of the Kampong Thom battlefield: Core of Operation X-91,” was run in five successive volumes of the *People’s Army* newspaper, on 27 February, 6 March, 13 March, 20 March, and 27 March, all in the year 1991.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Editorial staff, “Khmer Rouge Radio Boasted the Attack on Kampong Trach and Chhouk districts,” *SPK Bulletin* (Green label, Not for Public Dissemination), 21 February 1991.
- 31 Interview with a former deputy commander of the Kampot PMC, an officer of the KPRA Takeo PMC, and a former officer of the Kampot PMC battalion, Takeo, 12 July 2016.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.

## 7 Conclusion

### The elusive peace

On 23 October 1991, the Paris Peace Agreements were signed by all four factions. They agreed to demobilize 70 percent of their respective military forces and organize political parties to compete in the UN-sponsored election, rather than on the battlefield. After the event, which was broadcasted on national television, Prince Sihanouk soon made his historic return to Cambodia for the first time in twelve years. The Prince travelled with Premier Hun Sen, standing in an open-roof sedan (Figure 7.1). A large crowd, the author included, was waiting along the road where the sedan was traveling. In an ironic twist, Prince Sihanouk travelled with Premier Hun Sen along the “USSR Boulevard,” named after the sponsor of the road, the Soviet Union. Throughout the war, the Soviet Union played a large part in the survival of the PRK, especially with its constant supply of matériels. Now it seemed, even at the end of the war, the Soviet Union still continued to support the regime, literally.

But good times did not last. Almost immediately, the United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) ran into difficulties. It could not enter the Khmer Rouge strongholds to verify the demobilization process, as per the Paris Peace Agreements. In response, all other three factions also ceased their demobilization process. Then, the situation went from bad to worse. On 27 November 1991, Son Sen, the chief of general staff of the NADK and Khieu Samphan, the minister of foreign affairs of the CGDK (from the Khmer Rouge side) attempted to organize the headquarters of the Khmer Rouge’s new political party in Phnom Penh. But they were attacked by an angry mob who demanded retribution for the Khmer Rouge crimes between 1975 and 1979. The two men had to be evacuated to Bangkok, flanked by the PRK’s armored police cars. Pol Pot viewed the event as being orchestrated not just by the PRK, but also by the UNTAC. Predictably, the Khmer Rouge swiftly boycotted the election and attempted to sabotage the election many times. The NADK even launched a raid on Siem Reap provincial capital before the election.

Nevertheless, the election went ahead and the elected constitutional assembly ratified the new constitution on 24 September 1993. The FUNCINPEC

won the election, the Cambodian People's Party (PRK) came second and Son Sann's party won ten seats. After tense negotiation, the winner and the runner-up agreed to share power in a curious form of government. Prince Norodom Rannaridh, the commander-in-chief of the ANS, who was also the president of the FUNCINPEC Party, became first prime minister and Premier Hun Sen of the PRK became second prime minister. Son Sann held the position of president of the national assembly. In this new government, the decision-making was based on consensus between the two prime ministers, and the Ministry of National Defense (the former Ministry of Homeland Defense of the PRK) and the Ministry of Interior had to be led by co-ministers. Prince Sihanouk became king and the new government became the internationally recognized government. Significantly, the "outlawed" Khmer Rouge lost all foreign support.

From the point of view of the new government, it was now time to deal with the outlawed Khmer Rouge. They had not been able to defeat the PRK when they worked with the KPNLAF and the ANS, but now that the Khmer Rouge was isolated, the new government's plan to force the Khmer Rouge to surrender should have been a simple process. Accordingly, the new government combined the military forces from the KPRA, the KPNLAF and the ANS into a unified military called the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). The RCAF had also sent its officers to train with the renowned Indonesia special forces, the Kopassus. In theory, the Khmer Rouge should have no chance.

During the dry season of 1994, the combined RCAF units from all three factions (KPRA, KPNLAF, and ANS) together launched a major campaign along the Cambodian-Thai border, almost on the scale of the 16-Camps Campaign. Pailin, Malai, Samlaut, Anlong Veng, and Phnom Chat were the major targets. The RCAF used armor, artillery, and air power to try to bomb the Khmer Rouge into submission. It also introduced a tactic that had never been seen on the Cambodian battlefield: an airborne commando raid on Phnom Malai. The commandos were the first batch of graduates from the Kopassus training school.

For twenty-three years, the civil war had ravaged Cambodia. Maybe this was the time for this scourge of ideology to end. The 1994 campaign was conceived as the climax of the war in Cambodia. The scale of the battle would be fitting as the end of one of the longest wars in South East Asia. Just a few days after the start of the campaigns, the RCAF captured all of the major targets. The Khmer Rouge was on the rope and its NADK appeared to be only a shadow of its former glory.

## 7.1 People's War and operational graduation

The first lesson that we learned from the war in Cambodia was the nature of People's War as defined by Mao.<sup>1</sup> By definition, the resistance must use military power to achieve their political goal. In order to do this, Mao wrote

that the resistance must progress through three stages: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic offensive.<sup>2</sup>

In essence, Mao made two related assumptions. First of all, due to their small number at the beginning, the resistance must start as guerrillas (i.e. adopt guerrilla tactics) and second, they must make an operational graduation to become a conventional army and fight to seize power. Thus, People's War is, by definition, a hybrid war.

The second phase was the most difficult part. Successful resistance must be capable of making the transformation from a guerrilla army to a conventional army. Mao cautioned that such transformation is never straightforward.<sup>3</sup> For example, there is a problem that the resistance must overcome: military organizational transformation. As a general rule, when an army transitions from a guerrilla army to a conventional army, a lot of things have to change in order for this new army to function effectively, including but not limited to: doctrine, equipment, coordination, staff organization, communication, logistics, large-unit training, and the mindset of commanders. For example, the resistance seemed unable to find the best use for the tanks that they have captured from the KPRA and they had to resort to the high-caliber, drive-by shooting doctrine. For the non-communist resistance, the tanks were scarce and too important that they were reluctant to commit them in any large operation. But the most challenging thing that the resistance had to do was the organization of a joint command.

Most important of all, the resistance that, hitherto, had been organized as guerrilla bands, have to combine themselves into large formations that require a lot of cooperation and coordination with each other. They have to show that the collection of guerrilla fighters is able to fight in an integrated or synergistic manner in large operations. In Cambodia, the inability of the resistance groups to transform into a truly integrated conventional army cost them the war. While the Khmer Rouge had organized two Fronts along the border in Battambang, it was unable to mass those forces to attack the KPRA. Likewise, in Kampong Thom, despite having achieved surprise in the early hours of the operations, the three NADK divisions that the Khmer Rouge had committed in the attack on the provincial capital failed to coordinate with each other. They learned the hard way that fighting to occupy a town, let alone provincial capital, was not the same thing as a raid or ambush by one squad who hit the target and then ran away.

The KPNLAF did not fare better. As it attacked isolated outposts, it achieved astounding successes. But as it moved forward to the populated centers, it could neither mass its own forces nor cooperate with the other CGDK factions to attack. Its attempts to fight as a unified conventional force also did not work out as the JMC was lacking resources and manpower at the onset of the 1989 offensive. Advocates of joint operations with the ANS like Abdul Gaffar soon resigned from the JMC and left the border and the

JMC deserted headquarters, dejected.<sup>4</sup> While the KPNLAF could still work with the ANS, a truly joint command was still wanting, and there had been no instance where the KPNLAF benefited greatly from its cooperation with the NADK in large operations. As soon as the CGDK exhausted most of its resources fighting separately, it had to concede to negotiations and accepted that the PRK had staying power.

In summary, operational graduation is a luxury few resistance groups and revolutionaries have been able to develop. Specialized training, logistics, a cadre of capable officers, and mutual understanding between commanders are only some of the aspects a conventional army must master before it can fight effectively against a large enemy army. Cooperation and coordination between guerrilla bands in order to build an effective conventional force are also required. In this respect, the CGDK had failed.

But the hybrid nature of this war also presented unique challenges to the PRK. As a de facto government fighting this hybrid threat, the PRK was in a quandary: how should it organize its military, the KPRA? If the military was organized to counter a guerrilla tactic, it might not be able to counter a conventional threat when the resistance made its operational graduation. But if it was organized as a conventional army, then it might find itself inept to contain the guerrilla threat in the beginning stage. This dilemma was not unique to the PRK; even the United States in the Vietnam War found itself unable to decide on what would have been the best strategy to counter the hybrid threat that the communists presented, a debate that continues to this day.<sup>5</sup>

In Cambodia, on the other hand, the PRK seemed to have found the solution in the concept of a “People’s War.” While this concept ostensibly was a resistance playbook, the PRK was not shy in adopting it even though it was the established authority. To be fair, the PRK did not really adopt this People’s War model because it knew it could use the model to counter the resistance. On the contrary, the PRK chose the People’s War model to design its military organization simply because “it was the right thing for a communist army to be designed that way.” The fact that the PRK’s sponsor, the PAVN, was an avid practitioner of the People’s War did also help the PRK a lot in adopting the model.

Another factor pushing for the adoption of this model is perhaps the stark realities of the Cambodian battlefield. First, in 1979, this country was reeling from one of the worst disasters in human history, the Khmer Rouge genocide. It was only natural for the PRK to adopt a people-oriented military doctrine. Second, the PRK was in a poor state. To give readers some ideas of how poor that government was in 1979, one has to note that the civil servants and the military of the state at the time were paid in commodities such as rice or corns because there was no money. As a former officer of the operations section of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters put it: “We were poor, we could not fight a rich man’s war with technology leading

the front. We had to rely on the support of the people to fight the war. This was just natural.”<sup>6</sup> Success was more or less coincidental. For the PRK, it was success nonetheless.

## 7.2 Territorial forces, strategy, and morale

The first key of the PRK success was the inability of the CGDK to form a joint command. But the PRK also had its strength, namely the benefits of the People’s War model. For one, this model allowed the PRK to maintain a huge army, especially the inclusion of the territorial forces in its order of battle. In Cambodia, the conventional forces and the territorial forces were considered to be of almost equal importance. The territorial forces were most effective if used in the context of a population-centric strategy (i.e. protecting population centers). Moreover, the territorial forces could handle the hybrid war situation very well if they were used in conjunction with conventional forces. After a string of spectacular defeats on the border (the result of the K-5 belt strategy), the KPRA had to switch to a population-centric strategy, which eventually stalled the CGDK’s offensive.

In a population-centric strategy, the territorial troops played a major role in defending the population centers because they fought to defend their homes. They also prevented further disintegration of the conventional forces who faltered due to the effects of the territory-centric strategy. The CGDK simply could not muster enough people to launch a “general offensive-general uprising” type of operation like the PAVN and PLAF did in Vietnam in 1968. In short, the hybrid army gave the KPRA an advantage in strategic flexibility and morale.

Furthermore, one aspect that is missing from the current study is the role of the KPRA’s militia forces. Since their operations never involved more than one brigade, this book does not directly consider the role of the militias in Cambodia. In Cambodia, those who wanted to pursue a career in the armed forces would join the provincial battalion, while those who wanted to work at their homes and did not want to move to the border, usually chose to serve part-time in the militias. The KPRA commonly organized the militias in many surrounding districts to build an integrated defensive system. The system was called “*sompoan sahak phum prayut*,” which can be literally translated as “union of inter-hamlet offensive.” The *People’s Army* newspaper made frequent mention of this local tactic, which was aimed at preventing the CGDK’s infiltration.

It is hard to analyze the effects of this defensive system without looking at each individual encounter. It is possible to count the individual encounters described in the *People’s Army* newspaper, but this would still be incomplete. However, as we have seen in Chapter 5, in late October 1989, this system disaggregated the KPNLAF’s OMZ5. That was the only

recorded evidence of the militias system destroying a large unit (regiment-size). The Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey PMC, in particular, boasted in its unit's official history that after the election in 1993, when the ANS was integrated into the government, a former high-ranking commander of the ANS admitted that he dreaded the militias who always disturbed the ANS' infiltration.<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to substantiate this claim given the current state of documentation. However, we can look at what actually happened. With the exception of the areas along the border, the KPRA seemed to be able to move across provinces to reinforce other besieged units without encountering any catastrophic ambush from the CGDK. Someone must have covered its movement. Perhaps it was the militias, the unsung heroes of the KPRA. Moreover, while the Khmer Rouge had two Fronts organized in Pursat, Battambang, and Banteay Meanchey, those two Fronts could not mass to attack in large formation. That was understandable: if the Khmer Rouge was to attack as a Front, logistics would be extremely demanding. Such operations could not be launched if the KPRA militias were effective at observing and leading the main KPRA's units to destroy those logistics nodes prematurely.

Ultimately, the KPRA's victory was in part due to the increased role of the territorial forces towards the end of 1989 and early 1990. In Banteay Meanchey, the local forces refused to give up. In Kampong Thom, they were keys to the defense of the provincial capital. In Pursat and Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey, they prevented the guerrilla graduation into a conventional army. Siem Reap, just like MR2, reinforced the western provinces.

### 7.3 Morale is about location, location, location

Earlier in this book, we posited that the level of morale is considered to be the result of indoctrination and also the implementation of the political program. In Chapter 4, this book argued that because of indoctrination and the good implementation of the political program (partly through military organization), morale was high and the PRK was able to recruit many people to serve in its territorial units. These units were later transferred to the mobile divisions on the border.

However, this was where the level of morale changed. In almost all of the cases presented in this book, the mobile divisions and the reinforcement units (both consisting of territorial troops) that were stationed along the border, had been routed by the CGDK. The 196th Division and reinforcement units were routed from Pailin, the 179th Division and the units of the Banteay Meanchey PMC were routed and then allowed the KPNLAF to threaten the provincial capital. Even the 286th Division also saw some of its regiments withdraw to the rear. These events led to a revelation: the

territorial units all had high morale, but that morale vanished as soon as they were sent to the border.

The story does not end there. As soon as they were withdrawn back toward the interior and to protect the population centers, the territorial units once again found their calling and fought perhaps even harder than the mobile divisions. Banteay Meanchey province was the most prominent case where the local officials and military units refused to abandon the province. In their minds, it seemed, if they were going to go down anyway, it was in the area of their own homes that they would make their last stand. Perhaps, a dangerous army is not one that has tanks, but one that is willing to fight the tanks right to the bitter end.

From this examination of territorial units in three mini-cases (territorial units in the population center, territorial units in the jungle, and territorial units retreated to the population centers) we can see that location seemed to have played a role in determining the morale of the territorial units. In short, the territorial units gained high morale when they served close to their homes. This finding is very intuitive: all units became braver when defending their homes, than when they defended the jungle. Bravery was not the only asset that these forces possessed. Familiarity with the terrain was a dangerous weapon in the hands of the militias. If one lived in the village or hamlet, one would know exactly all the paths, ditches, roads, ravines, and all other features like the back of one's palm. Any minute change in the surrounding would be immediately picked up, especially if it was trampled by the enemy in the process of preparing ambush. If the KPRA soldiers in the mobile divisions spoke of the NADK with apprehension, the NADK actually dreaded the KPRA militias in equal measure.

These territorial forces had already built their units based on the same locality, and the indoctrination was both systematic and regular as facilitated by the institution of the political commander. These units were not bothered by the panic and rout of the mobile divisions that withdrew from the border; they still worked closely with the mobile divisions and were able to mount a strong defense because the units maintained their integrity. As the preceding section has shown, the militias in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province had even dealt a severe blow to the KPNLAF's OMZ5. In Kampong Thom, when almost everyone was in a state of panic, the PMC troops were the active ones in defending the province from the NADK. This, in turn, lessened the panic of other troops, who decided to rejoin the fight. Many former officers of the KPRA used to joke that panic was a contagious disease and that "even if a cow stepped on a twig, the sound could send the troops running away in panic."<sup>8</sup> But when they saw that the PMC troops maintained composure, the panic subsided.

In summary, previous chapters revealed that the territorial units had played a very important role in preventing the collapse of the mobile divisions and, by extension, the PRK's collapse. The mobile divisions were known for their offensive power (due to their equipment and heavy weapons), but the

territorial troops made up for the lack of matériels with local knowledge and intelligence, possibly high morale, and numbers. However, this chapter argues that local knowledge and morale of the territorial troops also depended on the location of service. When they were deployed far from their homes, the KPRA's territorial units were not very effective.

In short, morale is a combination of indoctrination and location. When territorial troops were withdrawn into the interior and worked well with the mobile divisions, they gave the PRK a military that was both big and had high morale, able to counter any kind of threat the CGDK threw at them. The People's War model is useful in that it could steadily build the units from a rag-tag army into a truly conventional army, supported by strong territorial troops who could defend well against guerrilla attack.

This sapped the CGDK of power to recruit the local population into their army. With a substantially smaller army, any CGDK error could prove fatal. The CGDK plan required that its operations had to be run perfectly in order for it to succeed. But as Clausewitz's concept of frictions warned us, the greatest enemy of a good war plan is the thought of having the perfect plan. In all, the CGDK seemed to make more errors as the operations intensified. By mid-1990, most of the CGDK factions had realized that they no longer had any capability to decisively defeat the KPRA.

In this case, number does play a very important role. The celebrated historian Hans Delbrück once discussed this issue when he studied ancient military history. The conventional wisdom holds that numbers is a major factor in winning a war. Yet, according to the same logic, numbers could be negated by good tactics and discipline such as in the case of the Roman army in their wars against the "barbarian tribes." One can even use this argument to explain why the disciplined colonial troops could defeat the numerically superior, but disorganized indigenous forces. Hans Delbrück dismissed this second logic and argued in his book, *Warfare in Antiquity*, that by verifying the sources for the numbers of opposing forces in major battle, the winning side almost invariably had more soldiers than the losing side.<sup>9</sup> He wrote of Caesar's campaign in Gaul:

We can regard the army at Alesia as representing the largest number of troops that the Gauls were able to assemble at one point. It only approached or, at most, equaled the Roman army in strength. But the Romans were superior to the loosely organized bands of Gauls in every kind of maneuvering, as well as in their battlefield movements. Their thoroughly trained, well-organized units and their strict discipline also enabled them to maintain their supply of provisions, where the poorly organized masses composing the Gallic army had soon dissipated their supplies. Vercingetorix therefore had to renounce any idea of reaching a decision through an open battle. He did not have at hand a numerical superiority that might have guaranteed victory for him.<sup>10</sup>

Good organization, discipline, and tactic were also important, but only because they allowed the winning side to muster a big army and sustain them for a long campaign. The losing side usually could not muster the same number because of the problems in organization and discipline. Such was the case of Caesar and Vercingetorix. In other words, as a general rule the large army still beats the small army or at least will have a huge advantage.

The same thing could be said of the KPRA. The People's War model gave the KPRA an organization that could muster a large army, including conventional forces, territorial forces, and militias. One unit could be routed by the CGDK, but the KPRA could simply replace it with another one. The numerically inferior CGDK was then thrown into an inadvertent war of attrition. For every KPRA unit that had been routed, the CGDK lost some of its forces. As the 1989 offensive intensified, the CGDK started to make mistakes as well, thus further deepening the personnel discrepancy problem. In the end, the CGDK did not have enough force to continue the offensive, unless it relied entirely on the NADK. This possibility worried Prince Sihanouk and the KPNLF, which eventually led to the political settlement. Hans Delbrück's thesis, it seems, is still valid: the winning side had numerical superiority, which was due to its organization. In the case of the KPRA, it was the organization for People's War that allowed them to field a large army.

## 7.4 Winners and losers

Who won the war? All wars end either by total military victory by one side over the other or by a political settlement. The Cambodian civil war ended by way of a political settlement, although that was much influenced by the military situation on the field (the KPRA was the dominant military on the field). In such instances, it is important for everyone to get something that they can use to declare victory. In the Cambodian civil war, all sides won, although some won more than others.

The KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC could declare victory because they were able to chase the Vietnamese out of Cambodia. But due to heavy losses and botched military operations, the KPNLF had to accept the position of a junior partner in the new government. In the 1998 election, the KPNLF's political structure and influence disappeared completely, largely due to infighting which occurred since 1982. The FUNCINPEC found itself in a similar military situation as the KPNLF in 1991, but by virtue of being the resistance movement of Prince Sihanouk, the FUNCINPEC was able to win the election in 1993 and became a significant actor in the new government. Prince Sihanouk could also call this a victory because he could return as king and restore the monarchy, albeit a constitutional monarchy, that had been overthrown by Lon Nol and Prince Sirimatak in 1970.

The biggest loser was the Khmer Rouge. Guilty of genocide and mass killing from 1975 to 1979, Pol Pot and his senior entourage almost pulled a great escape when Democratic Kampuchea was recognized as a signatory of the Paris Peace Agreements. Prime Minister Hun Sen noted in his speech in 2015 that it was fortunate for him and his government that Pol Pot boycotted the election by his (Pol Pot's) own accord, because “Had Pol Pot stayed in the election process, who would dare dissolve the political party who was a signatory of the Paris Peace Agreements?”<sup>11</sup> Prime Minister Hun Sen was right. The election boycott precipitated a chain of events that eventually shattered the Khmer Rouge’s political and military organization.

The biggest winner from the war, on the other hand, was the PRK. Ostracized by the international community for twelve years and branded as a mere Vietnamese puppet, it was a huge victory for Premier Hun Sen to be able to stand alongside Prince Sihanouk in the latter’s return to Phnom Penh in 1991. Sometimes, when you were always living on the brink, just to survive the enemy onslaught was, in itself, a sweet victory. But the PRK achieved more than survival. Soon after, King Sihanouk bestowed upon the Premier and two other senior leaders of the Cambodian People’s Party the title *Samdech* (Khmer for “Prince”). Surely, *Samdech* Hun Sen was the second Prime Minister, but the political apparatus of his PRK remained and it was the foundation of his success in later election cycles.

All of these achievements were due in no small part to the PRK’s military, the Kampuchea People’s Revolutionary Army. The KPRA panicked in the immediate aftermath of the PAVN withdrawal, but it did fight the CGDK to a bloody stalemate in 1990. By 1991, the KPRA established itself as the dominant military force on the battlefield and ensured that the PRK would survive throughout the political settlement and beyond. In essence, the PRK won because it adopted the People’s War model which allowed it to have a very effective and large army, the KPRA. In this war, the people were the ones who suffered, yet they were also keys to success.

## 7.5 Postscript

Dry season 1994. Less than a week after losing many strongholds along the border, the Khmer Rouge used against the RCAF a tactic that had been perfected since the 1980s: cutting supply lines while besieging the RCAF’s static positions. The RCAF’s airpower had no effect on the jungle below and the airborne commando raid failed and the units decimated. The RCAF in all fronts collapsed into a full rout. The failed military options soon led to the crisis in the coalition government and partly paved the way for the armed showdown between the FUNCINPEC and the Cambodian People’s Party in 1997. Cambodia had to wait until 1999 to fully experience peace after the Win-Win Policy of *Samdech* Prime Minister Hun Sen ended the political and military organization of the Khmer Rouge, the scourge of ideology, once and for all. But that is a story for another day.



Figure 7.1 Premier Hun Sen and Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh, November 1991.  
Source: SPK.

## Notes

- 1 It is worth repeating from Chapter 1 that this book adopted a standard definition of revolutionary war as a violent struggle to seize power in order to effect radical social and political changes.
- 2 Mao, *Selected Works*, 135–151.
- 3 Ibid., 151–153.
- 4 Correspondence with a former high-ranking official of the KPNLAF, 2014.
- 5 For the classic debate, see Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); and Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Presidio Press 1981).
- 6 Conversation with a former officer of the operations section of the KPRA General Staff Headquarters, Phnom Penh, 13 March 2013.
- 7 វិទ្យាស្ថាពាណិជ្ជកម្មសាស្ត្រកម្ម [Institute of Military History], ប្រវត្តិកម្ម ខេត្តសៀមរាប [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command], 50.
- 8 Conversation with officers of the KPRA's Kampong Thom PMC, Kampong Thom, 29 December 2013.
- 9 Hans Delbrück, *Warfare in Antiquity: History of the Art of War, Volume I*, Translated by Walter J. Renfroe Jr. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
- 10 Ibid., 504.
- 11 Hun Sen, “Lecture for Senior Military and Police Officers on the ‘Win-Win Policy’ that Terminated the Civil War in Cambodia,” Kandal province, 23 July 2015.

# Appendix A

## Cambodia timeline

### Chronology of conflict

**1863–1953:** French Protectorate.

**1951:** The Indochina Communist Party (ICP) helped establish the communist movement in Cambodia, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP).

**1955:** General election in Cambodia. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the hero of Cambodian independence, won the election in a landslide. The KPRP did not win any seats.

**1959:** Failed coup attempt against Prince Sihanouk. Many right-wing politicians and military officers were implicated in the coup attempt. Prince Sihanouk suspected they received American support.

**1962:** The second man in the KPRP defected to the Cambodian government and helped the government arrest many KPRP senior leaders. The KPRP party secretary disappeared and was presumed dead.

**1963:** Surviving junior members of the KPRP created a new party and changed the name to Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) in an attempt to sever all ties with the Vietnamese communists.

**1965:** Cambodia broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. North Vietnam enjoyed almost free

access on the Cambodian side of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border.

**1968:** Peasant revolt broke out in Samlot, Battambang province. The Cambodian communists (Khmer Rouge) claimed responsibility for the revolt. Prince Sihanouk began to suspect a communist conspiracy against his regime.

**June 1969:** Cambodia severed diplomatic relations with North Vietnam and reestablished diplomatic relations with the US. The Cambodian military conducted military operations against the PAVN along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. The PAVN avoided the engagements.

**18 March 1970:** Coup d'état against Prince Sihanouk. The Khmer Republic was proclaimed. Prince Sihanouk joined forces with the Khmer Rouge in order to fight to return to power.

**17 April 1975:** The Khmer Rouge captured the Cambodian capital city, Phnom Penh. A new, communist and totalitarian government, Democratic Kampuchea, was proclaimed. The Khmer Rouge turned against Prince Sihanouk and imprisoned the Prince in his own palace in Phnom Penh. The estimate of the number of people who perished under Democratic Kampuchea ranged from 700,000 to 3 million.

**1977:** War broke out between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam.

**7 January 1979:** The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) supported a Cambodian resistance army and overthrew Democratic Kampuchea.

**10 January 1979:** The Vietnamese-backed government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was proclaimed.

**1980–1981:** Thailand spearheaded the establishment of a non-communist Cambodian resistance movement, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF).

**1981:** Prince Sihanouk established a royalist, non-communist resistance movement, the FUNCINPEC.

**1982:** Under pressure from the sponsoring countries, the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF, and the FUNCINPEC came together to establish a unified resistance movement, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). Prince Sihanouk became the President of the CGDK.

**1984–1985:** The Vietnamese forces in Cambodia launched the 16-Camps Campaign, which pushed all CGDK camps deep into Thai territory. Vietnamese forces also clashed with Thai forces along the Cambodian-Thai border.

**1985:** The Vietnamese forces and the PRK began implementing the K-5 Belt strategy.

**2 December 1987:** Preliminary meeting between Hun Sen, Premier of the PRK, and Prince Sihanouk in France. Before the meeting, Vietnam had withdrawn a large contingent of its forces from Cambodia.

**September 1989:** The last Vietnamese units left Cambodia. A few days after the departure of the Vietnamese troops, the CGDK launched the offensive on all fronts.

**Early 1990:** The CGDK offensive stalled on all fronts. The Khmer Rouge stalled after the victory in Pailin, Battambang province. The KPNLF lost the majority of its units in Banteay Meanchey province, and the FUNCINPEC could not advance in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province.

**4 June 1990:** Prince Sihanouk met bilaterally with Hun Sen of the PRK in Tokyo. The two leaders agreed on an eventual election to be sponsored by the United Nations. On that very day, Staung district in Kampong Thom province fell to the Khmer Rouge.

**15 June 1990:** The NADK attacked Kampong Thom province in protest of the Tokyo meeting. The PRK successfully defended the province.

**17 January 1991:**

The PRK launched a general counter-offensive called “Operation X-91.” It was the largest offensive operation since the 16-Camps Campaign and was intended to recapture territories lost in 1989 and 1990.

**23 October 1991:**

All four factions to the Cambodian civil war met in Paris and agreed to a political deal that called for a cease-fire and a UN-sponsored election in Cambodia. Cambodia would be ruled in the transition period by an organization called the Supreme National Council of Cambodia (SNC). The PRK obtained two key concessions: half of the SNC members came from the PRK, and Premier Hun Sen co-chaired the SNC with Prince Sihanouk. The Khmer Rouge and the KPNLF had to fall in line.

## Appendix B

### Map legends and order of battle by province

#### Map legends

<i>Symbols</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
[Date]	Axis of attack
	Interdiction. Roads are constantly ambushed
	Routed. The commander lost control. The unit was not necessarily destroyed, but it panicked and ran away
	Tactical withdrawal. The unit also withdrew due to enemy action but unlike a rout, the commander in this case could still maintain command and control of the unit
	Planned axis of advance but one that never materializes
	Khmer Rouge area of influence. The shaded area denotes the area where the unit inside was active. If that area overlaps with a road, it means that the road was constantly ambushed. This is applicable only to the Khmer Rouge units
	Field headquarter
	Mountain and jungle
	Fortified defensive positions

#### Order of battle by province

In the maps, the KPRA units are represented by rectangles while the CGDK units are represented by ovals. These shapes are chosen arbitrarily and are not used to denote “friendly units” or “enemy units” as in conventional military campaign maps.

## Banteay Meanchey Phase 1

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Full unit name</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<b>PRK (KPRA)</b>		
179 Div. 9 Reg.	9th Regiment of the 179th Division	
179 Div. 11 Reg.	11th Regiment of the 179th Division	
286 Div. 5 Reg.	5th Regiment of the 286th Division	Battalion-size task force
6 Div. TF	Battalion-size task force of the 6th Division	
88 Log. Comm.	KPRA Logistics Command code name 88	
92 Brig. TF	Battalion-size task force of the 92nd Brigade	
KPMC TF	Battalion-size task force of the Kandal PMC	
MR2 TF	Regiment-size task force of Military Region 2	
MR4 44 Field HQ	Military Region 4 Field Headquarter code name 44	
MR4 42 Ind. Reg.	42nd Independent Regiment of Military Region 4	
MR4 69 Ind. Arm. Reg.	69th Independent Armor Regiment of Military Region 4	
MR4 71 Reg.	71st Regiment of Military Region 4	
MR5 BPMC TF	Battambang battalion task force (Military Region 5)	
<b>FUNCINPEC (ANS)</b>		
5 Div.	5th Division	
7 Brig.	7th Brigade	
11 Brig.	11th Brigade	
<b>KPNLF (KPNLAF)</b>		
OMZ3	Operational Military Zone 3	
OMZ5	Operational Military Zone 5	
OMZ6	Operational Military Zone 6	
OMZ7	Operational Military Zone 7	
Special OMZ 801	801st Regiment of the Special Operational Military Zone	

## Banteay Meanchey Phase 2

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Full unit name</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<i>PRK (KPRA)</i>		
179 Div. 9 Reg.	9th Regiment of the 179th Division	
286 Div. 5 Reg.	5th Regiment of the 286th Division	
BM21 Det.	BM-21 multiple rocket launcher detachment	
MR2 KCPMC TF	Kampong Cham PMC task force from Military Region 2	
MR2 SVPMC TF	Svay Rieng PMC task force from Military Region 2	
MR4 42 Ind. Reg.	42nd Independent Regiment of Military Region 4	
MR4 69 Ind. Arm. Reg.	69th Independent Armor Regiment of Military Region 4	
SRPMC TF	Siem Reap PMC battalion task force	
<i>Democratic Kampuchea (NADK)</i>		
519 Div.	519th Division	
<i>FUNCINPEC (ANS)</i>		
ANS Reg. TF	ANS Regimental task force	Exact number and unit name cannot be verified. It was more likely an ad hoc task force
<i>KPNLF (KPNLAF)</i>		
KPNLAF Artil. Det.	Artillery Detachment belonging to the KPNLAF	Ad hoc task force
KPNLAF Reg. TF	Ad hoc regimental task force belonging to the KPNLAF	
OMZ2	Operational Military Zone 2	
OMZ3	Operational Military Zone 3	
OMZ7	Operational Military Zone 7	

## Battambang

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Full unit name</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<i>PRK (KPRA)</i>		
4 Div.	4th Division	
6 Div.	6th Division	
196 Div.	196th Division	
92 Brig.	92nd Brigade	
94 Brig.	94th Brigade	
95 Brig.	95th Brigade	
MR2 TF	Regimental task force from Military Region 2	
<i>Democratic Kampuchea (NADK)</i>		
415 Div.	415th Division	
450 Div.	450th Division	
Front 250	Front 250	
Front 909	36th Division of Front 909	
36 Div.		
Front 909	469th Division of Front 909	
469 Div.		
Front 909	905th Division of Front 909	
905 Div.		

## Pailin assault and defense of Traeng

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Full unit name</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<i>PRK (KPRA)</i>		
196 Div.	196th Division	
4 Div.	4th Division	
4 Div. 13 Reg.	13th Regiment of the 4th Division	
4 Div. 14 Reg.	14th Regiment of the 4th Division	
4 Div. 15 Reg.	15th Regiment of the 4th Division	
4 Div. Eng. BN	4th Division's Combat Engineer Battalion	A functional battalion of the division
4 Div. Recon. BN	4th Division's Reconnaissance Battalion	A functional battalion of the division
69 Ind. Arm. Reg.	69th Independent Armor Regiment	At Traeng, the tanks were under tactical command of the 4th Division
92 Brig.	92nd Brigade	
95 Brig.	95th Brigade	
MR2 Reg. TF	A regimental task force from Military Region 2	
MR5 Artil. Det.	An artillery detachment from Military Region 5	
MR5 BM Battery	A BM-13 and BM-21 multiple rocket launchers battery from Military Region 5	

*Democratic Kampuchea (NADK)*

415 Div. 37 SF Reg.	37th Special Forces Regiment of the 415th Division
415 Div. 41 Reg.	41st Regiment of the 415th Division
415 Div. 42 Reg.	42nd Regiment of the 415th Division
415 Div. 43 Reg.	43rd Regiment of the 415th Division
415 Div. Artil. Det.	An artillery detachment from the 415th Division
415 Div. Reg. TF	Ad hoc, regiment-size task force of the 415th Division

## Kampong Thom

Abbreviation	Full unit name	Remarks
<i>PRK (KPRA)</i>		
5 Div. Reg. TF	Task force belonging to the 5th Division	Low morale
7 Div. Reg. TF	Task force belonging to the 7th Division	Low morale
9 Div. Reg. TF	Task force belonging to the 9th Division	Low morale
A3 Police BN	A3 Combat Police battalion (Ministry of Interior and Public Security)	
Arm. TF	Armor task force. The tanks were the PT-76, which belonged to the Naval Infantry Division	The interviewees tended to identify them as the tanks of the Ministry of Homeland Defense (who actually controlled the Naval Infantry Division)
Combined Div. TF	Combined KPRA troops the size of a reduced division	These forces were routed from Staung. If fighting alone, evidence indicated that these forces would have been combat ineffective
KTPMC 36 Reg.	36th Regiment of the Kampong Thom PMC	
KTPMC 89 Reg.	89th Regiment of the Kampong Thom PMC	
KTPMC 55 BN	55th Battalion of the Kampong Thom PMC	
MR2 89 Reg.	Field headquarter of the 89th Regiment from Military Region 2	
MR2 89 Reg.	16th Battalion of the 89th Regiment from Military Region 2	
16 BN		
MR2 89 Reg.	17th Battalion of the 89th Regiment from Military Region 2	
17 BN		
Nav. Inf. Div.	Naval Infantry Division	Under control of the Navy Directorate, Ministry of Homeland Defense
<i>Democratic Kampuchea (NADK)</i>		
616 Div.	616th Division	
785 Div.	785th Division	
802 Div.	802nd Division	
<i>FUNCINPEC (ANS)</i>		
15 Brig. BN TF	A battalion-size task force of the 15th Brigade	This ad hoc unit might have included some KPNLAF soldiers as well

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